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ONE STEP FORWARD INTO REALITY

Transvergent Reconfigurations of the *Jishizhuyi* Style in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

EDDIE BERTOZZI

Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

2014

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the stylistic evolution of one specific brand of film realism in contemporary Chinese cinema: the so-called *jishizhuyi* style ('on-the-spot' realism). In particular, the project focuses on the process of progressive aestheticisation that has affected this style since the turn of the twenty-first century, and the resulting development of a number of transgressive aesthetic features. In the first place, this study rethinks the assumptions of objectivity and spontaneity that conventionally characterise the practice and understanding of *jishizhuyi*. Hence, through the analysis of relevant case studies, the dissertation discusses the evolution of two main tendencies that show an increasingly subjective approach to the *jishizhuyi* style: the adoption of hyperrealist and supernatural visual elements – in films such as *Suzhou River*, *Shanghai Panic*, *Welcome to Destination Shanghai*, *The World*, and *Still Life* – and the purposeful interplay of fiction and non-fiction – in works such as *Disorder*, *Oxhide*, *Oxhide II*, *24 City*, and *The Ditch*. The dissertation contends that, albeit challenging to conventional understandings of realism, these aesthetics do not invalidate, but rather redefine the meaning and practice of film realism in relation to the specificities of China's contemporary historical framework. To investigate this topic, the project applies the 'cinema of transvergence' paradigm to Chinese film studies for the first time. This is understood as a transformative theoretical model that accounts for the evolution of film styles in a flexible manner. The discussion further combines a variety of interdisciplinary theories, ranging from magical realism to documentary performativity, in order to fulfil a formal and critical analysis of a stylistic phenomenon that has hitherto lacked a comprehensive systematisation in academic scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

Realism in contemporary mainland Chinese film is the main object of enquiry of the present dissertation. As a major stylistic category in the history of Chinese cinema, realism has been variously theorised and diversely expressed to adapt to an unstable cultural and ideological environment that has been subject to constant redefinition throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. More precisely, this project focuses on the evolution of one specific brand of Chinese film realism, namely, the so-called *jishizhuyi* (generally translated as ‘on-the-spot realism’). My purpose is to investigate the progressive development of this style, from its inception in the early 1990s to its latest derivations in the early 2010s. In particular, by arguing that realism in contemporary Chinese film has been undergoing a process of progressive aestheticisation, the discussion aims to address the emergence of a number of unconventional aesthetics; more specifically, the adoption of supernatural elements and the purposeful interplay of fiction and non-fiction. Since their emergence at the turn of the twenty-first century, these aestheticised transgressive detours have significantly redefined the understanding and practice of film realism in the context of mainland Chinese cinema.

I. QUESTIONS AND ARGUMENTS

Jia Zhangke, one of the most prominent contemporary Chinese directors, has raised a simple yet fundamental concern: “I am realist director. But we have to answer the question: what is realism today?”¹ The same question lies at the core of this research: how is the filmmaker’s understanding of realism shaped in relation to the historical-cultural contingencies of contemporary China? How does realism today differ from previous forms, both in theory and practice? And furthermore, what kind of relation does it entertain with previous aesthetic configurations and what factors contribute to the evolution of one realist form into another?

This research aims to address these questions by investigating the evolving aesthetic features of the realist style through the analysis of a number of selected case studies. More specifically, the thesis deals with two main sets of interconnected concerns. In the first place, I suggest a re-evaluation of the cinematic composition of the *jishizhuyi* style by examining the following questions: what kind of realist understanding does this practice convey? Does current

¹ Cited in Frodon, “Bazin en Asie,” 77.

scholarship exhaustively describe its aesthetic propositions? What elements – hitherto underestimated – have contributed to shaping its cinematic configuration? How can a more fluid and transformative interpretation of this notion update our critical understanding? How can we account for the style's future articulations?

The second set of issues directly concerns the abovementioned stylistic reconfigurations. The analysis highlights the development of transgressive, post-*jishizhuyi* aesthetics that test the limits and thereby redefine the meaning and practice of film realism in the context of contemporary Chinese cinema. What kind of unconventional aesthetics are employed in the films under consideration? What is the logic behind their development? How do they simultaneously link to and depart from the *jishizhuyi* convention? How do they renegotiate the borders between antithetical spheres such as the real and the unreal, objectivity and subjectivity, the unmediated and the constructed, documentary and fiction? And finally, given their disruptive potential, how can these stylistic developments nevertheless be understood within the concept of film realism?

The thesis first argues that the critical appraisal of *jishizhuyi* tends to be unproductively confined within overly rigid boundaries. As further elaborated below, given Chinese filmmakers' fascination with the methods and objectives of direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*, and as a result of their disavowal of ideological forgery and the realist unreliability of China's preceding cinematic traditions (i.e. socialist realism and so-called 'Fifth Generation' cinema), *jishizhuyi* has often been understood as working under the assumptions of objectivity and spontaneity. By focusing on the style and aesthetics of a number of relevant works, I aim to demonstrate that Chinese filmmakers have deployed a variety of subjective strategies rather than a single (and possibly unattainable) objective approach. I will also show how, in these films, a tendency towards directorial control and stylisation challenges the claim of absolute spontaneity. This re-evaluation will be undertaken in the light of a series of contextual and transnational factors that have shaped and can assist a better understanding of the heterogeneous composition of this style. By critically acknowledging *jishizhuyi* as a field characterised by the interplay of multiple voices, its transformative quality will be revealed; that is, the inherent dynamics that are constantly at work, which prompt its development into new forms. More generally, this argument reflects the overarching idea that film styles are never fixed and homogenous practices, but rather fluid approaches without clear-cut boundaries, and hence intrinsically inclined towards progressive metamorphosis.

The dissertation goes on to argue that, since the turn of the twenty-first century, the realist style in contemporary Chinese cinema has undergone a process of progressive aestheticisation and, more specifically, that a number of derivative aesthetics have gradually

developed from *jishizhuyi*. However, I am by no means subscribing to a Darwinian model of film historiography and maintaining, accordingly, that a new, coherent and self-contained realist wave has emerged overnight to replace the preceding ones. Instead, I aim to reveal a changing perception of film realism among Chinese filmmakers and draw attention to an updated understanding of this style whose evolving patterns rarely crystallise in uncomplicated works open to straightforward readings, but rather offer idiosyncratic and contradictory solutions that participate in the redefinition of realism in uneasy ways. Out of all of the multifaceted derivations of *jishizhuyi*, I have chosen to focus on two key tendencies: the adoption of hyperrealist and supernatural visual elements, and the deliberate interplay of fiction and non-fiction. By mapping the emergence of these forms against the stylistic development of *jishizhuyi*, my analysis aims to underline their connection to and concurrent departure from the previous style, which is achieved through a radicalisation of the subjective and aesthetic components. Although the insertion of blatantly unreal elements and the conscious blurring of formal categories seem to break with the basics of film realism, I contend that these features redefine the concept of realism without invalidating it. In fact, these features contribute to the same fundamental goal, namely, to give an account of historical reality. Contemporary China has been experiencing massive transformations, which have caused growing uncertainty and disorientation among the Chinese people. For realism to effectively represent this condition of widespread bewilderment, one possible coherent strategy is to resort to equally unordinary aesthetics. To sustain this argument, I suggest rethinking the very idea of realist authenticity. This notion can no longer be satisfied with a carbon copy of the material world, but rather requires a more subjective intervention. As the fast-paced changes of contemporary China express a reality that is hard to seize and consequently represent, the recording of an unmediated real can no longer effectively comment on the current situation. The individual expression of a ‘feeling of the real’ – a subjective and often emotional understanding of the world filtered through a director’s aesthetic sensitivity – proves more effective in capturing the instability of Chinese contemporary reality. Thus, this research will hopefully contribute to close some critical and analytical gaps in the field of Chinese film studies.

This dissertation draws on a variety of theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches that will be examined in each relevant chapter. Therein I will also detail how my critical contribution can rectify or add to those debates. In the remainder of this introduction, I will only address what I consider to be the main original contribution of my research to the existing scholarship. Over the past decade, a number of important studies have focused on the so-called Chinese independent or underground cinema that bloomed in the 1990s, of which *jishizhuyi* possibly represents the most characteristic style – for instance, the essays collected in Zhang Zhen’s

edited volume, *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Subsequent studies have further deepened the analysis by illustrating the evolving internal dynamics of this phenomenon in connection to the ongoing transformations of the broader socio-economic environment, such as Paul Pickowicz's edited collection *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, and Luke Robinson's *Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street*, which is specifically concerned with the so-called New Documentary Film Movement. My intention is to intervene in this debate both by providing an alternative reading of the stylistic aspects of the *jishizhuyi* phenomenon and, most importantly, by dealing with its more recent 'post-*jishizhuyi*' articulations. The emergence, characteristics, and implications of *jishizhuyi*-derived stylistic developments and their transgressive aesthetic features have not yet received systematic and consistent attention from scholars in the field. Therefore the present study hopes to offer the first comprehensive analysis of this topic.

Another point that needs addressing is the overall analytical perspective of this project. The momentous rise of alternative cinematic cultures in contemporary China has often been scrutinised by means of sociological and anthropological critical tools, that is, by examining how a film's contents, production conditions, and distribution and reception patterns respond to the distinctive social, economic, political and technological transformations of postsocialist China. Conversely, my purpose is to adopt a formal perspective that focuses primarily on representational concerns of film style and aesthetics. Far from conceiving this stance as a retreat into a territory of empty sophistic speculation, I contend that film styles and aesthetics can indeed produce meaning, and are thus significant in many respects beyond their immediate formal value. First, the establishment of a representational framework through the employment of certain aesthetics and techniques can convey a filmmaker's subjective perception and interpretation of the historical world, and thus provide a relevant commentary on it. Second, film styles and aesthetics constitute a common language shared by different film practices through channels of transnational circulation, and are thus able to flexibly capture the complexity of issues that, although shaped by China-specific factors, also interweave with broader global occurrences. Third, since styles and aesthetics constitute the formal grammar of film, focusing on them necessarily produces a commentary on the evolving understandings of cinematic art as a whole.

Finally, the adoption of the theoretical framework of a 'cinema of transvergence' – introduced in the next section – represents another original contribution of the present dissertation since, to the best of my knowledge, it has never been employed before in the field of Chinese film studies.

II. METHODS AND PRIMARY SOURCES

As extensively discussed in chapter 1, the concept of ‘cinema of transvergence’ was first discussed in a special issue of *Studies in French Cinema*, published in 2007. On that occasion, this critical paradigm was applied to the study of postcolonial Francophone cinema by combining Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of the rhizome and Marcos Novak’s concept of transvergence.² To improve the effectiveness of this method and critically adapt it for the field of Chinese film studies, I suggest detaching it from the particularities of postcolonial analysis and rather emphasising certain elements of Novak’s original theorisation that have been overlooked in the earliest applications of the model – most notably, the notion of allogenes. By combining the latter’s propositions with Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic understanding, I have attempted to set up a framework that can effectively illustrate the agency of multi-directional factors and account for the unceasing transformation of a given object of enquiry. The reasons why I have privileged this approach over the established national and transnational analytical models are also discussed in the following chapter. Such a choice serves a number of purposes. First, unlike the national model of film analysis, it discards hegemonic narratives and conventional understandings by proposing a multi-centred structural model. Second, unlike the somewhat contradictory propositions of transnational film theory, as will be further clarified below, this model manages to connect multi-directional lines within a genuinely post-national network, that is, one simultaneously responding to local and global instances. Third, this method takes the interaction of contrasting voices as a positive factor and highlights the resulting complexity as a valuable source of meaning.

The concept of cinema of transvergence thus serves as the overarching structural framework of the whole discussion. Following this method, I make use of a number of interdisciplinary theories that help better substantiate the main analytical strands of this research. In chapter 3, as I address *jishizhuyi* and argue for its heterogeneous cinematic composition, I attempt to establish a dialogic connection between various conceptions of film realism developed in different geographical and historical contexts: from the theorisations of European post-war critics such as André Bazin and Cesare Zavattini, to recent debates on *xianchang* aesthetics in China, and transnational contextualisations with contemporary realist practices of particular relevance such as the Iranian New Wave and the Dogme 95 movement.

² See *Studies in French Cinema* 7, no.2 (2007). The connection with Novak, and Deleuze and Guattari is best discussed in Will Higbee’s contribution to the issue, “Beyond the (Trans)National,” 79-91.

In chapter 4, the close readings of films illustrating the first post-*jishizhuyi* tendency analysed in the dissertation – namely the adoption of otherworldly atmospheres and supernatural elements within an otherwise quasi-documentary representations – are preceded by a discussion of different theories of magical realism. I first present these conceptualisations as they were originally developed in the fields of art (Franz Roh's 1925 study *Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Painting*) and literature (Alejo Carpentier's preface to his novel *The Kingdom of This World* and Angel Flores' influential essay *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction*). Next, I translate them to the context of postsocialist China and the field of film studies, in which their critical analysis has often lacked critical consistency.

Finally, in chapter 5, I engage documentary film theories to address the second post-*jishizhuyi* tendency, namely those films which, in a formally-conscious fashion, transgress the ontological boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Drawing on Stella Bruzzi's understanding of documentary performativity (as elaborated in her *New Documentary*) and extending Luke Robinson's analysis of Chinese independent documentary, the chapter further comments on a number of critical interventions, including issues of fictionalisation and aesthetic mediation in non-fiction filmmaking.

These theories support the analysis of a number of relevant case studies. As for the 'supernatural tendency', I will provide close readings of *Suzhou River* (*Suzhou he*, Lou Ye, 2000), *Shanghai Panic* (*Women haipa*, Andrew Cheng, 2001), *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* (*Mudidi Shanghai*, Andrew Cheng, 2003), *The World* (*Shijie*, Jia Zhangke, 2004), and *Still Life* (*San xia hao ren*, Jia Zhangke, 2006). The fiction/non-fiction interplay will instead be investigated through the cases of *Disorder* (*Xianshi shi guoqu de weilai*, Huang Weikai, 2009), *Oxhide* (*Niu pi*, Liu Jiayin, 2005), *Oxhide II* (*Niu pi II*, Liu Jiayin, 2009), *24 City* (*Ershisi cheng ji*, Jia Zhangke, 2008), and *The Ditch* (*Jiabianguou*, Wang Bing, 2010).

The primary sources have been chosen in accordance with the criteria of the production context, the narrative and aesthetic relevance to the topic of discussion, and the specific temporal framework. Hence all of the films under consideration are post-2000 mainland Chinese productions that variously comment on several aspects of Chinese reality while broadly abiding by an overall commitment to film realism (this statement will be substantiated in detail in the following chapters). Directed by filmmakers whose careers have been variously entangled with the experience of *jishizhuyi*, these works are paradigmatic illustrations of the transgressive aesthetic features introduced above. Since the term *jishizhuyi* has been employed to describe both fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, this dissertation also takes both categories into account as it engages with the style's developments. However, rather than emphasising the dividing line

between the two spheres, this discussion shows how fiction and non-fiction are increasingly hybridised and how theorisations developed within one field can be effectively translated across their blurring boundaries. As for my chosen timeframe, the focus on films produced since the turn of the twenty-first century is motivated more by practical evidence than by a desire for strict periodisation. It was in fact after the year 2000 that the stylistic evolutions under consideration started to take shape more consistently. Beside its symbolic value, this historical-cultural convergence is validated by a series of factors that affected cinematic production in China around the new millennium: the socio-economic consequences of China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organisation; the increasing diffusion and sophistication of digital technologies; the consolidation of professional links with the international film industry, resulting in stable co-production and distribution agreements, and extensive exposure in the film festival network; the wider circulation of foreign films through manifold channels of exhibition in China; and the inherent need to develop a fresh cinematic language at a time when the established forms were felt to have reached a point of expressive insufficiency.

Although not exhaustive of the whole phenomenon, this selection hopefully provides a significant corpus for a first critical systematisation of the transformative logic of film realism in contemporary Chinese cinema.

The films under scrutiny have hitherto received varying degrees of attention from scholars in the field. A film's academic exposure seems to be determined by a combination of chronological factors – older films can generally count a higher volume of critical interventions – and the popularity of the filmmaker in question. While films such as Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*, and Jia Zhangke's *The World* and *Still Life* have already been addressed in a number of English- and Chinese-language studies, I wish to add to the existing scholarship by providing alternative readings of these works. Through an investigation of their formal patterns within the distinctive framework of my research, I aim to integrate their aesthetic particularities into a comprehensive description of the evolving paths of film realism. The same applies to the more recent *24 City* by Jia Zhangke and *The Ditch* by Wang Bing, which have been examined in Wu Shu-chin's "Time, History, and Memory in Jia Zhangke's '24 City'," Elena Pollacchi's "Wang Bing's 'The Ditch': Spaces of History Between Documentary and Fiction," and Sebastian Veg's "The Limits of Representation: Wang Bing's Labour Camp Films"), among others. As expected, more recent titles have been given less attention in academic scholarship. Analytical readings of Liu Jianyin's *Oxhide* diptych, for instance, are more easily found in the form of online comments and reviews than as thorough academic treatments. The same applies to Huang Weikai's *Disorder*, with the notable exception of Zhang Zhen's detailed analysis in "Dream-Walking in Digital Wasteland: Observations on the Uses of Black and White in Chinese Independent Documentary". Among

the selected titles, Andrew Cheng's companion pieces *Shanghai Panic* and *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* are possibly the most overlooked by both academics and film reviewers, possibly due to the independent status of the director and his meteoric appearance on the film scene.³ By stressing the distinctive stylistic significance of these less-studied examples, this study thus attempts to fill another gap in Chinese film studies.

III. PROJECT DESIGN

The dissertation is composed of five chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss, respectively, the theoretical and historical-cultural frameworks of the argument proposed in this study. Chapter 3 constitutes a pivotal section of the dissertation, in that it accounts for the heterogeneous cinematic composition of *jishizhuyi* and the process of stylistic evolution that has led to the development of new aesthetic forms. Chapters 4 and 5 present close readings of the aforementioned case studies.

The discussion of a suitable overarching theoretical framework for this research is as important as the examination of its analytical focus. Hence Chapter 1 identifies a paradigmatic umbrella that can enable a fruitful investigation of my research topics. It begins with an overview of the theoretical approaches that are most commonly employed in Chinese film studies, namely the national and transnational cinema models. The purpose of this survey is to expose the theoretical and analytical shortcomings of such models, in order to identify the critical gaps and areas that require further intervention. The chapter aims to overcome the hegemonic narratives of the national and rethink the unbalanced propositions of the transnational by proposing the more exhaustive framework of a cinema of transvergence. By highlighting the key notion of allogeneis, the proposed model proves helpful in accounting for the hybrid interplay and multi-directional factors that have affected the development of the realist style in contemporary Chinese cinema.

To benefit from the analytical possibilities uncovered by the notion of transvergence, the context in which these stylistic evolutions have taken place requires careful scrutiny. Hence Chapter 2 illustrates the broad historical and cultural conditions under which the realist style has evolved. Firstly, the discussion addresses the historical development of realism in China, and points out its constitutive hybridity and constantly evolving nature. The analysis encompasses a multi-disciplinary set of theories and understandings of realism, highlighting in particular how

³ *Shanghai Panic* and *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* are in fact the only two films directed by Andrew Cheng, who works mainly as a director for television programmes.

tensions and debates that have emerged in the literary field have found relevant counterparts in the cinematic discourse. Secondly, the chapter delineates a working notion of postsocialism, which is understood here as the specific Chinese variant of the broader discourse of postmodernism. By stressing the tendency of postsocialism towards pluralisation of meaning and creative unfinishedness, the analysis carried out in this chapter defines a context in which the transgressive stylistic developments of film realism can be consistently discussed.

Having detailed both the theoretical and historical-cultural frameworks, the discussion then proceeds to examine the representational issues of *jishizhuyi* and its stylistic developments. Chapter 3 focuses on the aesthetic practice of *jishizhuyi* with the aim of overcoming conventional readings. The claims of spontaneity and objectivity that have come to define *jishizhuyi* practice – along with the concept of *xianchang* as its governing principle – are critically questioned through the analysis of key scenes from a number of relevant films. By drawing parallels with a set of cultural practices, both local and foreign (including Italian Neorealism, Shanghai left-wing cinema, New Realism in Chinese literature, Dogme 95, and the Iranian New Wave), the discussion aims to unearth the aesthetic complexity and hybrid nature of *jishizhuyi*, which lead to ever-changing new configurations. Hence the chapter argues for the stylistic development of *jishizhuyi* into a cinematic practice that negotiates a distinctive tension between an intention to document life ‘as it is’ and a creative re-imagination of the real via aesthetic means. In this process, objectivity is replaced by a ‘feeling of the real’ (i.e. the subjective, often emotional, perception of reality) and spontaneity by a progressive interest in visual aestheticisation. Accordingly, the idea of realist authenticity undergoes a substantial transformation, and furthermore, it no longer coincides with the objective rendering of a contingent reality, but rather with the director’s subjective sensibility.

Having defined the underlying attitude that shapes post-*jishizhuyi* stylistic formations, the thesis proceeds to address two main derivations of this style and provides textual evidence for the above-mentioned arguments by discussing a number of case studies. Chapter 4 deals with the adoption of otherworldly atmospheres and supernatural elements within otherwise quasi-documentary fictional representations. In order to account for the relevance and specific aesthetic value of this tendency, I find it useful to discuss this within the discourse of magical realism. Hence the first part of this chapter presents the main theories of magical realism as originally conceived in the literature and the figurative arts, and contextualises them within the realm of Chinese studies, and film studies in particular. As substantiated by close readings of *Suzhou River*, *Shanghai Panic*, *Welcome to Destination Shanghai*, *The World*, and *Still Life*, magical realism proves to be a flexible and effective framework to account for the contradictory impulses shown in the films under analysis – namely, the documentation of contingent realities and the simultaneous introduction of disruptive non-realistic elements.

Chapter 5 addresses the purposeful interplay of fictional and non-fictional strategies in post-*jishizhuyi* works. Although the blurred boundary between documentary and fiction already represents a defining characteristic of traditional *jishizhuyi* practice, the interaction between the two spheres is now performed with increasing aesthetic awareness. To substantiate this argument, I draw on documentary theory and, in particular, theories of documentary performativity in the context of the so-called New Documentary Film Movement. I contend that the works analysed in this chapter – *Disorder*, *Oxhide*, *Oxhide II*, *24 City*, and *The Ditch* – actually constitute an evolution of this specific brand of non-fiction practice.

Finally, in the conclusion, I offer some final remarks in the light of the analysis conducted in the preceding chapters, while also suggesting possible future developments of my research.

All translations from sources in languages other than English are my own unless otherwise stated. Chinese words follow the *pinyin* transcription system. For the first occurrence in the text, films are mentioned as follows: *International title (Original title, director, year)*. In subsequent occurrences they are cited only with their international title.

Early drafts of small sections of this research have previously appeared in journal articles, though they have been substantially revised for the purposes of this dissertation. A shorter version of the discussion of the national and transnational paradigms in relation to the concept of Chineseness, featured in Chapter 1, appears in “The Possibility of Chineseness: Negotiating Chinese Identity in ‘Shun Li and the Poet’ and ‘The Arrival of Wang’” (*Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* 2, no.1 (2014): 59-73). The ideas that are further expanded in Chapter 3, along with an earlier version of the analysis of *Still Life* and theories of magical realism (Chapter 4), were originally developed in “A Still Life of the Wildest Things: Magical Realism in Contemporary Chinese Cinema and the Reconfiguration of the ‘Jishizhuyi’ Style” (*Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 2 (2012): 153-72).

CHAPTER 1

LOOKING FOR TRANSVERGENCE

“We are tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much”.

(Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 17)

Contending that a certain piece of research is undertaken within the field of film studies is obviously an unqualified statement that does not say much about the extent, theory, and methodology of that particular investigation. Similarly, placing it within the field of Chinese film studies not only entails the same range of unspecified questions, but also raises further issues regarding the implications of the ethnic supplement ‘Chinese’. The choice of an appropriate theoretical framework and a related analytical approach therefore constitutes a crucial concern for my research.

This chapter first presents a critical survey of the main paradigms adopted in Chinese film studies – namely the national and transnational cinema models – to expose their theoretical, analytical and ideological limitations. Moving beyond the national model (that produce hegemonic and homogenising narratives) and rethinking the propositions of the transnational model (that at times is too generic, and at times shows new essentialist temptations), I will thus suggest a more exhaustive framework for my research. Adding theoretical substance to Zhang Yingjin’s inspiring advocacy for comparative film studies, I discuss a new critical paradigm: cinema of transvergence. The idea of transvergence was originally developed by ‘transarchitect’ Marcos Novak in the field of virtual architecture, and is ideally connected to the notion of rhizome as conceived by French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Originally translated to the realm of film studies to account for diasporic concerns in Francophone cinema, this concept can be freed from its postcolonial subtext and granted a wider scope of action. Hence my purpose is to apply it to the study of Chinese film by focusing in particular on one of its defining mechanisms, which Novak defines as the process of allogenesi. This proposition will hopefully accomplish a double goal: on the one hand, rethinking the national model in fluid and contested terms; and on the other hand, setting up a consistent theoretical ground to fruitfully address issues of film style and aesthetics in the cinema of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

1. PARADIGMS FOR A CHINESE (POST-)NATIONAL CINEMA

1.1 NATIONAL CINEMA OF CHINESENESS

‘National cinema’ has long been the dominant theoretical framework for the analysis of cinematic works produced within a specific nation-state and, generally speaking, for any film produced outside the Hollywood system. Scholars have adopted several approaches to configure the model and produce a national film historiography; therefore, as Andrew Higson maintains, “there is not a single universally accepted discourse of national cinema”.¹

The text-based, the consumption- and distribution-based, the auteurist and the movement-based are among the approaches most commonly adopted in national cinema analysis. Text-based approaches mainly focus on the themes emerging from a specific body of works. By selecting a number of representative directors and films, one detects a series of recurrent features that variously explore issues of nationhood, shared styles and prototypical images of national characters. This method presents at least two significant limitations: firstly, its narrow textual focus tends to ignore extra-textual matters of production, distribution, exhibition and reception; secondly, the selection of the texts itself appears highly problematic, as the act of choosing certain films while ignoring all of the others is apparently limiting and ideologically hegemonic. To overcome the former shortcoming, one can instead define national cinema by focusing on the actual context of production, the activity of the audiences, and the discursive environment in which their cinematic experience is produced. However, undertaking such a production- and consumption-based approach just brings about the mirror limitation of the textual reading: whilst one overlooks production- and distribution-related issues, the other is unable to account for content-related and formal matters. The second shortcoming is best illustrated by considering the two remaining approaches. The auteurist approach focuses on a group of filmmakers that are categorised as ‘authors’ on the basis of a number of distinctive aesthetic features in their films and mobilises a paradigmatic shift by which national cinema comes to coincide with art film. Similarly, the movement approach singles out distinctive cinematic waves which follow one another in the orderly development of a given national film history. Both of these approaches deploy an elitist strategy to produce a homogeneous yet incomplete picture of a larger cinematic landscape at the expense of its internal complexity. Here, epistemological continuity is highlighted for the sake of a linear historical account and national pride is often titillated by a selection of high-quality works that are supposedly able to express the heritage of the nation. More alarmingly, the construction of such a historiography

¹ Higson, “The Concept of National Cinema,” 36.

involves a fundamental standardisation of the culture, which is performed through the discriminating appropriation of certain specific voices and traditions to the detriment of other concurrent cinematic expressions, which are instead purposely ignored.²

Chinese film history offers a helpful illustration of these concerns. For instance, one can point to the traditional system of classification that divides different cinematic waves into 'generations' (*dai*) of filmmakers.³ In conventional film historiographies, canonised generations are presented as the only (and accordingly the 'highest') cinematic expressions of their time. This is a historically misleading assumption, not only because these waves have often coexisted with other different kinds of cinematic productions, but also because they have often emerged more as ruptures than as rational developments in the evolutionary logic of film history. A case in point is, for instance, the so-called 'left-wing cinema' (*zuoyi dianying*), which was the flagship of the golden age of Shanghai film in the 1930s. This kind of realist, socially-concerned cinema exemplified by the work of Sun Yu, Cai Chusheng, Yuan Muzhi, Wu Yonggang and Shen Xiling, not only coexisted with different market-oriented cinematic productions, but can be better envisaged as a discontinuity within a more enduring flow of commercial cinema, whose production had already started in the 1920s and would continue up until the 1940s.⁴ Likewise, the so-called Fifth Generation of the 1980s (*di wu dai*), epitomised by the early, ground-breaking works of Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou and Zhang Junzhao, not only operated

² For a discussion and critique of the several approaches to the national cinema analysis, see Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 7-9; and Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," 36-37.

³ The history of Chinese cinema is traditionally divided into generations of filmmakers. The following is a brief chronological outline, which is controversially open to some denials: First Generation (1910-20s), Second Generation (1930-40s), Third Generation (1950-1970s), Fourth Generation (late 1970s – early 1980s), Fifth Generation (starts in the mid-1980s), Sixth Generation (starts in the 1990s). Every generation was supposed to share some distinctive features; however determining their exact boundaries proves to be a difficult task. Directors allegedly included in the same generation, or who were working within the same historical frame, often exhibited individual styles that were very different from one another and, in a similar way, filmmakers theoretically belonging to distinct generations could show overlapping formal and narrative motifs. Therefore the concept of generation now appears to be an outdated one, a narrow notion displaying limited analytical usefulness. For an engaging analysis of the Generational model and its functioning, see Zhang, "Directors, Aesthetics, Genres," 57-62.

⁴ Major 'left-wing cinema' productions include Sun Yu's *Daybreak* (*Tianming*, 1933), *Little Toys* (*Xiao wanyi*, 1933), and *The Big Road* (*Da lu*, 1935); Cai Chusheng's *Song of the Fishermen* (*Yuguang qu*, 1934) and *New Women* (*Xin nüxing*, 1935); Yuan Muzhi's *Scenes of City Life* (*Dushi fengguang*, 1935) and *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi*, 1937); Wu Yonggang's *The Goddess* (*Shennü*, 1934); Shen Xiling's *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou*, 1937). On the other hand, naming everything that is not 'left-wing cinema' with the singular label 'commercial cinema' would be an equally reductive action, as many different variants can be identified within this group, for instance the martial arts – magic spirit films (*wuxia shenguai*) and the dancing-and-singing films (*gewu pian*). For an account of early Chinese cinema and left-wing films, see Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*; and Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*. Zhang Yingjin also notices how the term *zuoyi* (left-wing) has recently been questioned and alternative definitions have been evaluated that do not focus on the political belief of the directors (as different ideological positions within this "left-wing" could actually be detected), but point instead to highlighting their values of rupture and newness. Possible options that can be deemed historically accurate due to their frequent occurrence in the sources of the time are *xinxing* (newly emerging) and *xinsheng* (new-born). Zhang, "National Cinema as Translocal Practice," 18.

alongside more conventional directors and trends, but can be better interpreted as a break within the dominant tradition of socialist filmmaking.⁵ One can also notice how, due to censorship problems and distribution conditions, the Fifth Generation, at least in its heyday, worked more as a marginalised force than as the banner of national cinematic glory. If anything, this label has been introduced by the international film festival circuit – which has constantly shown and magnified their works – and the Euro-American academia – which has copiously analysed them. In other words, this set of anomalies combines to defy the cultural logic of the nation-state (and of national cinema accordingly) by suggesting interplays occurring at levels other than the national. On the one hand, they reveal the existence of alternative narratives developing within the body of the nation; on the other hand, they hint at cultural flows occurring across its borders.

Although different generations have shown more or less pronounced nationalistic stances, Chinese cinema has always dealt with some sort of non-national agency in the form of artistic influences, technological apparatuses, production funds, distribution and reception patterns. Does the national cinema model take into account this transnational attitude? In the logic of national cinema, the non-national (Hollywood, other national cinemas) exists only as an entity in the shadows. It is scarcely taken into consideration in analytical investigations, yet is strategically present when a given national cinema is called to define itself. As Andrew Higson puts it, two complementary processes are at work here. The first is the ‘inward-looking process’ through which a specific cinematography reflects on the continuity of one nation’s political, economic and cultural identity. Higson contends that, “to identify a national cinema is first of all to specify a coherence and a unity; it is to proclaim a unique identity and a stable set of meanings”.⁶ This is complemented by a second drive, which might be defined as an ‘outward-looking process’, for which a certain national cinema asserts its defining specificity in opposition to other national cinemas and, in particular, by contrasting dominant film discourses (often embodied by Hollywood mainstream production). It is in this approach that the non-national is more visibly suggested, but far from establishing a productive transnational relation, the rigid structure of national cinema contrasts it in a binary clash that is readable as cultural resistance to extra-national cultural forms.⁷

This lack of flexibility is mainly due to the critical construction of the concept of nation and of the interpretive models deployed for its cultural products. The discourse on the nation is

⁵ Major Fifth Generation productions include Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 1984) and *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*, 1987); Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *On the Hunting Ground* (*Liechang Zhasa*, 1985) and *Horse Thief* (*Daoma zei*, 1986); Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* (*Hong Gaoliang*, 1987); Zhang Junzhao’s *One and Eight* (*Yi ge he ba ge*, 1983).

⁶ Higson, “The Concept of National Cinema,” 37.

⁷ For a discussion of the inward- and outward-looking processes, see *ibid.*, 38-42.

generally understood in terms of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community', a geo-political space whose inhabitants supposedly share a common national identity and a sense of belonging to a coherent community characterised by a long-established set of traditions and rituals.⁸ However, Anderson himself warns about the ideological artificiality of the concept of nation, which ultimately attempts to establish a link between a self-defined cultural group and a legal and political entity. It is by referring to this internal logic that Susan Hayward accounts for the creation of "*abstract or imagined communities [...] which get passed off as 'natural', although of course they are in fact not natural*"⁹, echoing Ernest Gellner's argument that it is nationalism that invents the nation and not the nation that produces nationalism.¹⁰ In other words, as Thomas Erikson puts it, "a nationalist holds that political *boundaries* should be coterminous with *cultural boundaries*" while "an important aim of nationalist ideology is to [...] *recreate* a sentiment of wholeness and continuity with the past to transcend that alienation or rupture between individual and society that *modernity* brought about".¹¹

Under distinctive historical-political conditions, the Chinese case looks to be a particularly intricate one, since it continually exceeds the reference to a single nation-state (the PRC) and more broadly involves a constellation of distinct cultural sites (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and other diasporic communities) linked to the symbolic universe of Chineseness. The notion of Chineseness hence becomes crucial to the cultural analysis of 'national' products. Heated scholarly discussions have developed in recent years around this topic, and Tu Weiming's notion of 'cultural China' as a description of Chineseness has possibly registered some of the harshest reactions. 'Cultural China' identifies a symbolic cultural space aiming to transcend the ethnic, territorial and linguistic boundaries that conventionally stereotype Chineseness as a category linked to the Han race, Mainland China, and Mandarin language respectively. Tu proposes the symbol of a 'living tree' to visualise his proposition: an articulated net of branches stretching in many directions exemplifies what denotes being Chinese in different ethnic, territorial and linguistic locations. However, the structure of the tree also suggests a single trunk from which all of the branches are spreading, and that stands as the marker of a common history, worldview, culture and identity. Tu's proposition is thus fundamentally contradictory: he attempts to locate Chineseness in several transnational communities configured as decentralised intellectual peripheries heterogeneously belonging to the global context, but finally asserts another culturally-informed centrism, which is essentially hegemonic and homogenising. Moreover, Tu presents Chineseness as a natural given, so in the end what constitutes this

⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁹ Hayward, "Framing National Cinemas," 89. Original emphasis.

¹⁰ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 55-56.

¹¹ Erikson, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 6, 105. Original emphasis.

common cultural identity remains largely unqualified.¹² In film studies, a similar mechanism is enacted by Nick Browne and his description of the ‘new Chinese cinemas’ of the 1980s. The pluralisation of the word ‘cinema’ acknowledges different forms of cinematic Chineseness, namely Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan cinema. However, Browne clarifies that “to exaggerate these differences would be to overlook a common cultural tradition of social, ideological, and aesthetic forms that stands behind and informs Chinese cinema as a whole.”¹³ Rey Chow suspects that in referring to such an unspecified common cultural tradition, scholars such as Tu and Browne locate the essence of Chineseness in an idealised antiquity or even beyond history, that is a fixed and unchangeable site “which appears to be more bone fide when it is found among the dead”.¹⁴ Such an interpretation of Chineseness is thus the counterpart of the “sentiment of wholeness” mentioned above: the former shapes the centripetal cultural politics of the Chinese world and, accordingly, a homogenous notion of Chinese national cinema; the latter justifies the formation of the nation-state, the hegemonic establishment of national cinema and its related analytical model.

Borrowing Higson’s words, these structural shortcomings are due to the fact that both the imagined community argument and the national cinema model appear to be “not always sympathetic to what we might call the contingency or instability of the national”. This implies acknowledging that in fact “borders are always leaky” and that “the degree of cultural cross-breeding and interpenetration [...] suggests that modern cultural formations are invariably hybrid and impure”.¹⁵ Rethinking the national cinema model in the Chinese context therefore means, first of all, rethinking Chineseness, and shifting from a homogenous and fixed understanding to a contested and dynamic (heterogeneous, fluid, negotiated, and negotiable) one. As Ian Ang puts it, “Chineseness is not a category with fixed content [...] but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated”¹⁶ – an unfinished and untotalisable, permanently evolving concept. On this same line, Chris Berry suggests envisioning “national cinema as a multiplicity of projects, authored by different individuals, groups, and institutions with various purposes”, so that in the end we can “speak of Chinese national cinemas and distinguish their circumstances as socially, politically and historically specific projects contesting each other”.¹⁷ By acknowledging that “there is no single cinema that is *the national cinema*, but several”¹⁸ and hence recasting it “as a relational

¹² Tu, “Cultural China”. For a critique of ‘cultural China’, see Ang, “Can One Say No to Chineseness?,” 285-90.

¹³ Browne, “Introduction,” 1.

¹⁴ Chow, “Introduction,” 12.

¹⁵ Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema,” 66, 67.

¹⁶ Ang, “Can One Say No to Chineseness?,” 283.

¹⁷ Berry, “If China Can Say No, Can China Make Movies?,” 132.

¹⁸ Hayward, *French National Cinema*, 14. Original emphasis.

term – a set of processes rather than an essence”¹⁹, we can finally approach Chinese film studies from a fresh perspective that shows multiplicity and flexibility as its apparent qualities. However, although absolutely fundamental, the act of poststructuralist pluralisation is not enough according to Rey Chow, who instead argues that “Chineseness [should] be productively put under erasure – not in the sense of being written out of existence but in the sense of being unpacked”.²⁰ And to ‘unpack Chineseness’, what is necessary is to find an appropriate method of reading.

1.2 PHANTOMS OF THE TRANSNATIONAL

Acknowledging the shortcomings of the national cinema model, film studies scholars have started looking for paradigms to better account for contemporary national formations and their cultural products. More specifically in the Chinese case, scholars have been searching for methods whereby Chineseness can be ‘unpacking’. By arguing that the national is neither the only, nor the most suitable investigative framework, Andrew Higson identifies the transnational as a more appropriate ground for analysis.²¹ Acknowledging the flow of hybrid exchange that characterises cinematic activities both within and across the borders of the nation-state, the transnational model destabilises the national cinema approach by challenging the idea that political and cultural boundaries must coincide. The undoing of such a correspondence generates a number of new discursive spheres, which take into account cinematic practices that failed to find recognition within the previous model. As Stacey Weber-Fève puts it, “a transnational approach to film studies creates an opportunity to define and construct diacritically one ‘nation’ in relation to another as well as to define and diacritically construct multicultural facets existing inside the ‘nation’”, while proposing “a polycentric look at the film industry and its inter/national productions”.²²

However, ‘transnational cinema’ does not identify a single theoretical approach, but rather a broad and varied critical framework. As Chris Berry warns, it is a term that “has been used not only widely but also loosely and sometimes in ways that are contradictory”.²³ Elizabeth Ezra’s and Terry Rowden’s understanding of the transnational can be taken as an example to show how shortcomings of the proposition are still located in the unresolved dialogic relation between the national and its transnational dimension. The two scholars aptly argue that “the

¹⁹ O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, 5.

²⁰ Chow, “Introduction,” 18.

²¹ Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema,” 69-73.

²² Weber-Fève, *Re-Hybridizing Transnational Domesticity and Femininity*, xxxvii.

²³ Berry, “Transnational Chinese Film Studies,” 9.

transnational at once transcends the national and presupposes it", and hence it is not "an anarchic free-for-all in which blissfully deracinated post-national subjects revel in ludically mystified states of ahistoricity". Accordingly, the national does not disappear, but rather "must be recognized as an emotionally charged component of the construction of the narratives of cultural identity that people at all levels of society use to maintain a stable sense of self".²⁴ However, they also suggest understanding films and filmmakers in the context of an overarching global system, but this proposition seems to weaken the specificity of their analysis. More generally, the application of the transnational model is affected by two diverging conceptions of transnationalism: on the one hand, those who, following Mohammed Bamyeh, see it as "a process of global consolidation" producing homogenised cultural expressions; and on the other hand, scholars like Ulf Hannerz and Prasenjit Duara, for whom transnationalism constitutes a means to oppose the universalising tendency that is inherent in the notion of globalisation.²⁵

In terms of analytical practice, the transnational in film studies has most often been employed to address two sets of questions: matters of production, distribution and reception on the one hand; and postcolonial identities, migration and diaspora on the other hand. As for the former group of questions, the transnational investigates the globalised logic of the international film market in which production funds, distribution patterns, and modes of exhibition and reception often defy national borders. One can notice, in fact, that films are regularly produced with international capital and distributed worldwide by sales agents and domestic distributors as well as through alternative channels (including online piracy). Another relevant aspect here is the activity of the audience; that is, "the diversity of reception, the recognition that the meanings an audience reads into a film are heavily dependent on the cultural context in which they watch it".²⁶ However, this kind of transnational production- and consumption-based approach seems to work better in the analysis of 'dominant cinemas' (e.g. big-budget blockbusters aiming to hit the global box offices), while it looks less effective in addressing low-budget works that unravel minor narratives.

The latter is the case, for example, in films dealing with issues of migration and diaspora. When applied to these instances, the transnational shares the concerns of the postcolonial analysis: the struggle against a fixed and hegemonic understanding of nation and national culture, the negotiations between the centre and the margins, the local and the global. However, the transnational aims to exceed the limitations of the postcolonial. Borrowing Ezra's and Rowden's words, postcolonial theory "has not proven to be as flexible a tool as it initially seemed

²⁴ Ezra and Rowden, "General Introduction," 4.

²⁵ Bamyeh, "Transnationalism," 1; Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, 6; Duara, "Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty," 1030. For a discussion of transnationalism that compares Bamyeh, Hannerz and Duara, see Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 4.

²⁶ Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," 68-69.

[to be]”, because “tied [...] to particular conditions of imperial oppression, postcolonialism loses its conceptual coherence when it is called upon to provide analytical grounding for situations that do not have or that have not been defined exclusively by the imperial or colonial pre-histories”.²⁷ Whilst postcolonial analysis is thus perceived as socio-historically ambiguous due to its Euro-centric foundation and focus on the past, the transnational instead benefits from being grounded in the present and possibly projected towards the future. A transnational cinematic approach incorporating a revised postcolonial vision is offered, for instance, by the concept of ‘third cinema’. Conceived as a site of cultural and political resistance against the forces of colonialism and imperialism, third cinema provides critical counter-narratives opposing both the Hollywood mainstream (‘first cinema’) and the aesthetic principles of European auteur cinema (‘second cinema’). However, historically necessary as it is, its rhetoric easily leads to new essentialisms. First, a scheme dividing first, second and third cinema is as unwarranted and homogenising as the concept of national cinema. Second, the emphasis on ideas of national essence and cultural authenticity, deployed to oppose Western dominant discourses, fails to recognise the increasingly hybrid character of contemporary societies and the complex cosmopolitan identities of the filmmakers. Third, the focus on questions of ‘cultural exceptionality’ confines ‘third films’ to the periphery of film industries and film cultures, making it difficult to assess their relevance within broader frames of reference.²⁸

Similar tensions, achievements and shortcomings also pertain to the transnational analysis of Chinese cinema. The transnational approach was first applied to Chinese film studies by Sheldon H. Lu in his ground-breaking 1997 anthology *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*. By stating that “Chinese *national* cinema can only be understood in its properly *transnational* context”, Lu subsumes the cinemas of mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong under the wider conceptual umbrella of ‘transnational Chinese cinemas’ and suggests considering their historical development in the global context of border-crossing cultural production, marketing and consumption.²⁹ However, as Song Hwee Lim contends, such an approach “does not so much displace the nation as reinstate it within a larger framework” and “focus[ing] on transnationalism chiefly as a mode of production and consumption [it] does not address, much less challenge, the sign of ‘China’ in either its symbolic or substantive senses”.³⁰ Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar attempt to sidestep this limitation by understanding the

²⁷ Ezra and Rowden, “General Introduction,” 7.

²⁸ Key studies dealing with postcolonial film analysis, third cinema, and issues of migration and diaspora in film include Nafici, *An Accented Cinema*; Marks, *The Skin of the Film*; Mowitt, *Re-Takes*; Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*; Guneratne and Dissanayake, *Rethinking Third Cinema*. For a discussion and critique of these approaches, see Weber-Fève, *Re-Hybridizing Transnational Domesticity and Femininity*, xxxiii-xl; Ezra and Rowden, “General Introduction,” 4-5.

²⁹ Lu, “Historical Introduction,” 3. Original emphasis.

³⁰ Lim, *Celluloid Comrades*, 5.

transnational “not as a higher order, but as a larger arena connecting differences, so that a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact upon each other in various types of relationships ranging from synergy to contest”.³¹ Whilst better positioned to problematise the multiple and shifting formations of Chineseness, this alternative conceptualisation does not differ consistently from Lu’s proposition in terms of critical practice. In all of these cases, the critical purchase of the term ‘transnational’ remains unclear, to the extent that it might be replaced by labels such as ‘supranational’ or ‘regional cinema’.³²

The notion of ‘Chinese-language cinema’, proposed by Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh in their 2005 anthology *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*, signals a different approach. The expression ‘Chinese-language film’ (*huayu dianying*) has been attested since the early 1990s. Scholars from Taiwan and Hong Kong have used the term to overtake political divisions in the name of a linguistic common ground.³³ Lu and Yeh borrow it to define “films that use predominantly Chinese dialects and are made in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora, as well as those produced through transnational collaborations with other film industries”.³⁴ However, this proposition also brings its own limitation, namely the replacement of one kind of essentialism, the national mode, with another, a limiting focus on language matters. As Zhang Yingjin puts it, “its narrow linguistic emphasis may not be sufficient to capture the rich variety of geopolitics, regionalism, ethnicity, and polylocality in Chinese cinema”.³⁵ Another language-based approach is that enunciated by Shu-mei Shih in her 2007 volume *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. Modelled on the Deleuzian concept of minor literature, the Sinophone indicates “a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries”.³⁶ The Sinophone proposes a reconfiguration of the narratives of Chinese migration and diaspora beyond the traditional Han-centred paradigm of the *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese), which tends to exclude alternative configurations of ethnicity, language and culture. The Sinophone aims to remove the emphasis from issues of ethnicity and nationality and focus instead on the multi-accented contingency of peripheral communities of Sinitic language and culture, “where ‘routes’ can also become ‘roots’, inscribing a place-based rather than necessarily

³¹ Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 5.

³² For a critique of the transnational approach applied to Chinese film studies, see Higbee and Lim, “Concepts of Transnational Cinema”, 14-17.

³³ For a selection of such scholars and works, see Lu and Yeh, “Introduction,” 23n13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁵ Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality*, 20.

³⁶ Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 4.

ancestral understanding of belonging”.³⁷ Besides the degree of non-flexibility that language-centred configurations invariably assume (for instance, with respect to the increasing occurrence of trans-lingual film practices), this conceptualisation of the Sinophone bears other shortcomings.³⁸ Shih’s radically counter-hegemonic proposition struggles to effectively account for the internal process of heterogenisation characterising mainland China, hence limiting the applicability of the arguments to cultural expressions specifically defined by issues of migration and diaspora. Sheldon H. Lu again, in his *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, attempts to bypass this limit by proposing a notion of Sinophone that is inclusive of mainland China as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. Refusing to identify China as a hegemonic core and the Chinese diaspora as a periphery, this approach in fact represents an attempt to ‘unpack Chineseness’. However, it remains unclear how this differs from Lu’s previous ‘Chinese-language cinema’ model and how it can avoid replicating its same limitations.³⁹

As these examples attest, the major limitation of the transnational models lies in the unresolved relation with the national. Reinstated in a higher or larger order, the national has either been reproduced as an underlying hegemonic essence or unproductively dispersed in a globalised unspecificity. Acknowledging these shortcomings, in the inaugural essay of the academic journal *Transnational Cinemas*, editors Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim advise on the practice for a ‘critical transnationalism’. Following their proposition, transnationalism “cannot be taken as a given or for granted” and “cannot be merely descriptive [...] neither can it be purely prescriptive”; it does “not ghettoize transnational film-making in interstitial and marginal spaces but rather interrogates how these film-making activities negotiate with the national at all levels”, being aware of the “tensions and dialogic relationship between the national and the transnational, rather than simply negating one in favour of the other”. It has to be concerned with the examination of “all forms of cross-border film-making activities” to avoid understanding the flows of transnational cinema “as taking place uniquely between national cinemas” and

³⁷ Yue and Koo, “From Diasporic Cinemas to Sinophone Cinemas,” 10. For a multifaceted debate on the Sinophone, see the special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 1.

³⁸ Critical reservations on the use of language-based models, and in particular with regard to the Sinophone, can be found in Lim, “Six Chinese Cinemas in Search of an Historiography,” 38; and Chan and Willis, “Articulating British Chinese Experiences On-Screen”.

³⁹ Regarding this point, Lu contends that his idea of the Sinophone “assumes a more flexible position in regard to national identity and cultural affiliation” than the Chinese-language film model (Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 162-63). However, besides remaining unconvincing, this configuration also seems to weaken the political relevance of Shu-mei Shih’s original theorisation. In a later discussion of the topic, Lu admits that his first use of the term ‘Sinophone’ in fact “was almost interchangeable with ‘Chinese-language cinema’, except that the suffix “-phone” (as in ‘francophone’, ‘anglophone’, ‘lusophone’, etc) is meant to evoke a connection with the postcolonial discourse. He finally concludes that “Sinophone cinema denotes the field and range of Chinese-language cinema and yet at the same time is particularly sensate to issues of diaspora, identity-formation, colonialism and postcoloniality” – a definition that perhaps, in this expanded configuration, sounds too generic though. Lu, “Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-Language Film Studies,” 22.

instead evaluate “the potential for local, regional and diasporic film cultures to affect, subvert and transform national and transnational cinemas”. Finally, it wishes to engage “the largely neglected question of the audience” and set “a dialogue with scholarship in other disciplines”.⁴⁰ Higbee’s and Lim’s proposition is particularly significant in that it acknowledges the lingering relevance of the national as an agency still affecting film practices in dialogic connection with the transnational. On the same lines, Zhang Yingjin notices that “indeed, the very term ‘transnational’ betrays such inevitable grounding in the national, while the plethora of prefixes [...] only testifies to the conceptual centrality of the national in refashioning film studies”.⁴¹ In fact, opposing the arguments that stigmatise any proposed transnational model as clinging to some form of essentialism, Sheldon Lu further states that:

in order to define and circumscribe any object of enquiry, such as ‘Chinese cinema’, there must be specific material determinations (not determinism), whether linguistic, territorial or cultural. Questions of nationhood, language and geography are necessarily deployed, played out and consequently interrogated in a given Chinese-language film. A concept that has no material determination is a phantom object.⁴²

Although it might sound slightly revisionist, Lu’s statement is especially helpful in reminding us that some form of national determination is not only inevitable, but also fundamental for an effective analytical practice. However, the question that remains unanswered is how the national can be critically reconfigured to achieve a more flexible understanding of its agency within the transnational context suggested by the globally interconnected world. In this regard, Pietari Kääpä suggests rethinking transnational cinema in post-national terms. While for Zhang Yingjin, transnational cinema “seeks pluralism and interculturalism, favors cultural flows in space, and tends to produce syncretism, synthesis, hybridity, and possibly even third cultures”⁴³, Kääpä’s post-national proposition focuses instead on “cultural disjunctures and dead-ends”, that is, those middle spaces in which cultural products can be evaluated from a genuinely transnational perspective.⁴⁴ Kääpä contends that we live in “a global society where national designations still prevail”, but also in which “a complex connectivity based on other forms of identification outside of the nation” is continually suggested. Thinking post-nationally rather than transnationally would thus lead us to finally

⁴⁰ Higbee and Lim, “Concepts of Transnational Cinema,” 18.

⁴¹ Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 26.

⁴² Lu, “Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-Language Film Studies,” 17.

⁴³ Zhang, *Screening China*, 140.

⁴⁴ Kääpä, *The Cinema of Mika Kaurismäki*, 15.

“approach the meaning of national from an intensely critical perspective”.⁴⁵ By undoing the binary opposition that has hitherto configured national and transnational as mutually exclusive forces, the field is now re-imagined as a system of ruptures and cracks in which multiple national and transnational flows are reaching from different directions and coming to merge, eroding the surface of a given analytical terrain to constantly modify its appearance. Kääpä’s post-national conceptualisation is interesting because it ideally takes into consideration Lu’s call for material determination, while refusing tree-like paradigms and generalist acknowledgements about the persistence of the national. It does not simply reinstate the national in a larger domain either, but rather recognises the degree of fragmentariness and contradictions (“disjunctures and dead-ends”) that characterise the contemporary condition and aims to work on these features to reach a more effective cinematic analysis.

To clarify the claims and analytical perspectives uncovered by the post-national proposition, the following discussion moves from Zhang Yingjin’s advocacy of comparative film studies to illustrate the main theoretical framework for the present research: cinema of transvergence.

2. THE IMPERATIVE OF TRANSVERGENCE

2.1 THE COMPARATIVE OPTION

When one refers to comparative film studies, the discipline of comparative literature inevitably comes to mind. However, the differences between the two must be carefully delineated, as they are rooted in different ideological grounds. Comparative literature is intimately connected to the ideology of the nation-state and works transnationally, or better still internationally, to establish parallels between literary products of different national provenance. In this process of comparison, the researcher aims to detect similar themes, modes of expression, stylistic patterns and artistic influences. Therefore the aim of comparative literature is twofold: on the one hand, it seeks to account for the exceptional contributions that one specific national literature can offer to the global literary scene; and on the other hand, it celebrates the humanistic values of universality and commonality in aesthetic ambitions. However, under contemporary circumstances, the effects of globalisation and multiculturalism have progressively cracked the consistency of national boundaries and revealed the heterogeneity of any cultural formation. Accordingly, the suitability of comparative literature has inevitably

⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

declined. Considering the ideological discourse sustaining the discipline and acknowledging the waning suitability of its analytical power, parallels between comparative literature and the functioning of the national cinema model can be easily drawn.⁴⁶

In his 2010 volume *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, Zhang Yingjin illustrates his understanding of comparative film studies as a critical paradigm. The scholar mainly delineates his argument by highlighting the points of discontinuity between the proposed model and the ideology and practice of comparative literature. On the one hand, comparative film studies fundamentally dismiss the ideology of the nation-state and the analytical practices related to it, such as the national cinema model. On the other hand, the proposed discipline aims to equalise the dignity of the high culture (which once represented the main elitist focus of comparative literature) with the newly reappraised popular culture. In more concrete terms, what sets comparative film studies apart from comparative literature is a different understanding of the word 'comparative', now conceived with a substantially broadened meaning. The idea of 'comparative' is thus intended along four major lines: comparative as transnational – defying the borders and boundaries of the nation-state to articulate meanings both across and within them; comparative as intertextual – drawing parallels and detecting points of contact between different cultural products; comparative as cross-media – investigating the interplays between cultural expressions developed through different media; and comparative as interdisciplinary – engaging theories conceived in various disciplines as long as these can provide new challenging perspectives for the field of film studies.⁴⁷

Why should we opt for the comparative framework rather than the transnational? According to Zhang Yingjin, "the term 'transnational' remains unsettled primarily because there are multiple interpretations of the national in transnationalism".⁴⁸ In other words, Zhang maintains that the transnational formula fails to explain what the idea of national actually entails, since once the fundamental heterogeneity of the nation is acknowledged, any absolute statement about language, ethnicity, religion, or national culture in general is hard to justify. Moreover, the scholar argues that, if the emphasis in the term 'transnational' falls instead on the prefix 'trans' – that is the act of crossing political, cultural and linguistic borders – then it is possible to claim that comparative film studies already subsume transnational film studies. In fact, comparative film studies neither negate the transnational model nor dismiss its power and achievements, but rather see transnationalism as only one constituent of its analytical apparatus. Although effectively positioned to account for some specific phenomena (e.g. the flows of

⁴⁶ For a discussion of comparative literature in relation to comparative film studies, see Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 29.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 40.

capital, technologies, and human resources between different sites of production), the transnational approach alone fails to provide an exhaustive picture of the many-sided system constituting contemporary cinemas. The purpose of comparative film studies is thus to multiply the directions of analysis, to rely on flexible vectors of investigation, to enhance fluidity of thought, and to benefit from cross-media and interdisciplinary examinations. Its multi-directionality aims to look simultaneously “outwards (transnationalism, globalization), inwards (cultural tradition, aesthetic conventions), backwards (history, memory), and sideways (cross-media practices, interdisciplinary research)”.⁴⁹ By means of this multi-directional functioning, Chineseness can thus be productively unpacked: many ‘hands’ reaching from many sides come to remove its wrapping, veil by veil, to finally show its multi-layered quality. Following this logic, comparative film studies prove able to overcome the limitations of the transnational model and, more specifically, to accomplish two major goals: on the one hand, this approach productively takes into account the lingering power of the national while fundamentally deconstructing any hegemonic residual; and on the other hand, it broadens the analytical potential and allows a fruitful investigation into a wider range of issues. Zhang Yingjin has made the first attempt to apply this framework by introducing the theorisation of polylocality to Chinese cinema. Unlike transnationalism that acts across boundaries that are theoretically placed at the level of the national, polylocality instead suggests that the flow of film production, distribution, exhibition and reception – as well as the traffic of ideas, styles and technologies – takes places more pertinently on a local scale and between multiple sites. A case in point is, for instance, the golden age of Chinese cinema in the 1930s that, although conventionally linked to the expression of national sentiments, can instead be better evaluated as the cultural articulation of a particular city (Shanghai) rather than of an entire nation-state. Through this shift of scale, the analysis thus readjusts its enquiry to a different level and begins to unveil an original net of multi-directional connections.⁵⁰

However, I suspect that the spatial obsession inherent in the proposition of polylocality (as previously in the transnational paradigm) finally prevents the comparative film framework from fully expressing its analytical potential. In this regard, Zhang Yingjin makes a more convincing case for the comparative option when he envisions its potential to challenge conventional historiographies of Chinese cinema. Dismissing the traditional model that develops along lines of continuity, causality, and totality of meaning, the comparative instead privileges a postmodern historiographic approach of discontinuity, fragmentation and complexity. By means of a polyphonic structure of analysis, it pictures Chinese film history as a multiplicity of micro-

⁴⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 6-12. See also Zhang, “Transnationalism and Translocality in Chinese Cinema”.

histories, hitherto marginalised by the master narrative of the nation-state, which unfold through overlapping temporalities and spatialities. Aiming to avoid totalisation and instead see Chinese film history as a multitude of contesting voices, the comparative framework focuses on the interstitial points of interaction between different analytical layers. To account for these meaningful points, Zhang suggests recovering the notion of the 'node' from comparative literatures. The node is theoretically configured as "a point in a network at which the multiple lines of development come together" as well as "the starting point for multiple derivations". By keeping track of the 'constellation' created by these nodes within the field of enquiry, the analysis is able to "map the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous or the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous".⁵¹ A most probably unintentional yet indicative illustration of this method is provided by Wendy Larson's iconoclastic reading of the so-called Fifth Generation. Despite the directors' self-proclaimed attack on socialist realist filmmaking, Larson shows a number of nodal points connecting the two traditions: the moral-allegorical social framework, the focus on the countryside and its inhabitants, the conflict with past customs, shared colour and sound choices.⁵² The purpose of Larson's study is not simply to detect a series of superficial commonalities between the two film practices, but rather to rethink historical links and reflect on the cultural logic that grants the transmission of certain poetic and stylistic habits. This example is also particularly interesting because it reveals the potential of the comparative framework to fruitfully address questions of film style and representation (the focus of my research). Largely overlooked (or ineffectively tackled) by the transnational analysis of Chinese cinema, these issues find in the comparative approach a more flexible framework for their investigation, one that allows the application of diverse analytical strategies to effectively produce original, coherent and comprehensive examinations.

In terms of scholarly attention, the comparative film framework is still a largely under-developed paradigm in Chinese cinema studies.⁵³ To date, the only consistent reaction to Zhang Yingjin's proposition has been articulated by Chris Berry, who states that, "even understood beyond the nation-state, the comparative does not easily make space for the phenomena that not only cross but straddle and defy borders".⁵⁴ To overcome Berry's exact objection and enhance the applicability of the approach, I suggest linking the comparative option to another,

⁵¹ Zhang, "National Cinema as Translocal Practice," 20.

⁵² Larson, "The Fifth Generation".

⁵³ Paul Willemen polemically ascribes the limited spread of comparative film studies to the unfair development of academia: "This expansion in academia's disciplinary field creates job and departmental expansion opportunities. The result is that scholars formed within the paradigm of Euro-American film theory are rushing to plant their flags on the terrain of, for instance, Chinese, Japanese, or Indian film studies. In that respect, those scholars and departments are actively delaying the advent of genuine comparative film studies by trying to impose the paradigms of Euro-American film and aesthetic theories upon non-European cultural practices." Willemen, "The National," 26-27.

⁵⁴ Berry, "Transnational Chinese Film Studies," 11.

recently configured paradigm: the cinema of transvergence. More than a simple combination of two similar schemes, I see cinema of transvergence as a critical upgrading of the comparative framework, substantiated with in-depth theoretical complexity and refined by a distinctive method of reading.

2.2 CINEMA OF TRANSVERGENCE

To exhaustively describe cinema of transvergence, I will first follow Will Higbee's perceptive intuition that understands the theoretical mechanism of this proposition as a synthesis of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of rhizome, and Marcos Novak's concept of transvergence.⁵⁵

In the field of botany, a rhizome literally refers to the modification of a plant stem, which develops a complex root system that propagates horizontally rather than vertically, and spreads in a fragmented and multi-directional way.⁵⁶ Deleuze and Guattari adopt this metaphor in their philosophical thought to build up a system of knowledge that can effectively account, in a networked and transversal manner, for different kinds of power relations. A description of Deleuze's and Guattari's rhizome risks being as intricate as the roots that the concept refers to; hence, for the sake of clarity, I summarise its four main features as follows: multiplicity of connections, non-centredness, anti-hierarchy, and heterogeneity.⁵⁷ Regarding the first characteristic, the two philosophers state that, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be".⁵⁸ These possibilities of connection, or better still, these imperatives of connection, are indeed multiple and take the form of a "map that [...] is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight".⁵⁹ It is by means of these countless points of entry and innumerable lines of flight that the rhizome operates to understand the complexity of a given object of investigation from multi-directional perspectives. But how is this multi-directionality defined? What are the logic of its motions and the attitude of its connections? To further specify the rhizomatic functioning, the two French thinkers draw upon botanical metaphors again, and describe an emblematic opposition between the rhizome and the 'tree' – and the symbol of the tree should in fact recall

⁵⁵ Higbee, "Beyond the (Trans)National".

⁵⁶ Bamboo, water lily and ginger are among the most common plants that develop a rhizomatic root system.

⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome by identifying six defining characteristics: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, rupture, cartography and decalcomania. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3-28.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21.

Tu Wei-ming's 'living tree'.⁶⁰ Whilst the rhizome, through its net of intersecting lines and unforeseeable motions, is defined as "alliance, uniquely alliance", the tree instead builds up by "filiation".⁶¹ In fact, "this is very different from a tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order".⁶² The rhizome does not establish any original point of filiation that stands in a position of greater significance than the other points of the whole; that is, it supports a non-centred and anti-hierarchical conception of knowledge. Accordingly, its ultimate aim is to struggle against any classical epistemology that stems from concepts of fixed centres, hierarchies and binary structures. But does this rejection of a fixed centre mean that, almost in a postmodern fashion, there is no centre at all? Elaborating on the notion of the rhizome, Rossella Ferrari asks, "but what if notions of 'centre' and 'peripheries' were discarded? What if we recognized 'a plurality of edges devoid of an identifiable center' or, better still, a plurality of centres and multiple foci or creative/cognitive emanation?"⁶³ Following this latter suggestion, we are encouraged to undertake a further perspectival shift that testifies to the fundamental heterogeneity of the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari define heterogeneity as "a method of the rhizome type [that] can analyze language only by decentring it onto other dimensions and other registers".⁶⁴ Therefore heterogeneity in this context has to be understood at multiple levels, that is, as an inherent characteristic of the rhizome's identity as well as a specific mode of its functioning. The heterogeneous identity of the rhizome is exemplified by it being "neither subject nor object", as well as having "no beginning and no end [...] always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*".⁶⁵ Being an 'interbeing' is crucial for the rhizome, as it determines "another way of travelling and moving" which implies that "where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for?" become "totally useless questions".⁶⁶ Rather, the rhizome as an interbeing performs "a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other way" by establishing "a logic of the AND, overthrow[ing] ontology, do[ing] away with foundations, nullify[ing] endings and beginnings".⁶⁷ It is by means of this logic of the AND that heterogeneity in the rhizome also means heterogeneity of the analytical approaches, and it is by advocating a decentring onto other dimensions that we can envision the rhizome system in its full expression when it performs cross-media and multi-disciplinary practices.

⁶⁰ The connection between the symbol of the tree in Deleuze and Guattari and Tu Wei-ming's 'living tree' is suggested in Ferrari, *Journey(s) to the East*, 360.

⁶¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 27, 25.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶³ Ferrari, *Journey(s) to the East*, 362. For the quotation within the quotation, see Harding, "From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges", 24.

⁶⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27. Original emphasis.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28. Original emphasis.

Elaborating on the idea of transversal movement that grants heterogeneity to the rhizomatic system, the notion of transvergence proves fitting. Theorised in the field of virtual architecture, the concept of transvergence was first conceived by self-proclaimed ‘transarchitect’ Marcos Novak. Although the scholar does not mention it explicitly, this notion shares several common points with the rhizome. In particular, it is the ultimate aim of both systems that coincides: looking for unconventional, multi-directional paths of knowledge to account for fragmented, discontinuous realities. Novak’s theoretical speculations are specifically conceived to explore “the limits of architecture by considering several manners in which our definitions of space, inhabitation and culture are becoming alien”.⁶⁸ The scholar’s proposition is historically grounded in what he defines as ‘transmodernity’, that is, the contemporary cultural period characterised by rapid and technologically-driven changes. Pointing to “the condition of *virtuality*, in both a technological and a philosophical sense”, the concept of transmodernity primarily focuses on the “incessant intellectual restlessness and conceptual mobility” of the prefix ‘trans-’, which mobilises our current epistemological attitudes to break with both present and future taxonomic boundaries.⁶⁹ In this sense, transmodernity defines an era of “rapid and intentional *cladogenesis*”, that is, a tentacular and fragmented ramification of knowledge, realities, and means of investigation.⁷⁰ The ultimate purpose of this process is allogenesis, e.g. the production of the alien, a key notion highlighting “our growing interest to the *alien* [that] indicates an epistemological shift of interest from linear modes of evolution to branching ones”.⁷¹ Novak’s formulation pays particular attention to the distinction between the processes of allogenesis and xenogenesis, as they aim to produce completely different forms of the alien.⁷² Whilst xenogenesis is concerned with an “alien-from-without”, e.g. an alien form that derives externally from a distinct species, allogenesis instead produces an “alien-from-within [...] which is formed from within a species as that species evolves to become alien to its origin”.⁷³ In other words, the alien-from-within is a form that originates within the self of reference, is part of that same self and concurrently contributes to modifying it. By combining the dynamism of the prefix ‘trans-’ and the alien-ating mechanism of allogenesis, the result is an “alchemical and kaleidoscopic perpetual-motion machine, one whose epoch-altering output is endless *allogenetic transvergence*”.⁷⁴ In Novak’s understanding, transvergence is “a tactic of corrective derailment of simple extrapolations into *elsewhere*, the territory of the *allo-*” and is therefore

⁶⁸ Novak, “Speciation, Transvergence, Allogenesis,” 74.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 66. Original emphasis.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 67. Original emphasis. The word ‘cladogenesis’ borrows the Greek root *clados*, meaning ‘branch’.

⁷¹ Ibid., 66. Original emphasis. The word ‘allogenesis’ borrows the Greek root *allo*, meaning ‘alien’.

⁷² The word ‘xenogenesis’ borrows the Greek root *xeno*, meaning ‘stranger, foreigner’.

⁷³ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 66. Original emphasis.

opposed to movements of both convergence and divergence, which instead suggest linear strategies that aim to reach fixed central points.⁷⁵ The epistemological space of both convergence and divergence can be visualised as a “continuous landmass” on which objective and cultural truths can be pursued by means of the logic of continuity and consistency.⁷⁶ On the contrary, the space of transvergence is an “alien archipelago” where “true statements [are] islands [...] only accessible by leaps, flights and voyages on vessels of artifice”.⁷⁷ Hence, this fragmented space is characterised by the absence of a fixed centre and is exclusively crossed by translinear vectors – or, we can say rhizomatic vectors – that, only by avoiding conventional routes, finally reach those scattered sites of truth. By escaping the threats of conceptual totalisation, transvergence thus supports the venture into alien spaces, that is, where the alien can be produced and the overall field of investigation can finally be turned into something alien to its original self.

The possibility of a cinema of transvergence was first tested in the field of French film studies during a conference held in London in 2006 and then further investigated in a special issue of the journal *Studies in French Cinema* published the following year.⁷⁸ As previously mentioned, in his contribution to this issue, Will Higbee interprets the concept as a combination of Novak’s theorisation of transvergence, and Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of rhizome. In Higbee’s view, the idea of a cinema of transvergence should not be seen as an alternative to either the national or the transnational, but rather, it should be seen as a new theoretical approach to refashion these models, and to overcome their limitations while making the most of their analytical specificities. Unlike the homogenising tendency of national cinemas, a cinema of transvergence celebrates difference and the existence of multiple contrasting voices, “in a very postmodern way”.⁷⁹ Ideally drawing on Ann Kaplan’s argument that sees this postmodern fragmentation positively as a chance to liberate a wide variety of voices,⁸⁰ cinema of transvergence radically challenges the construction of the national by questioning the artificial overlap of political and cultural boundaries and therefore subverting the hegemonic structures

⁷⁵ Ibid., 68. Original emphasis.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 66. As examples of linear epistemologies promoting continuity and consistence, Novak mentions Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead’s *Principles of Mathematics* (*Principia Mathematica*), David Hilbert and Wilhelm Ackermann’s *Principle of Mathematical Logic* (*Grundzüge der theoretischen Logik*), and David Hilbert and Paul Bernay’s *Foundations of Mathematics* (*Grundlagen der Mathematik*).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 66. As examples of epistemologies originating in the “alien archipelago”, Novak cites Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorems, and theories of complexity, chaos and catastrophe, dynamical systems and artificial life.

⁷⁸ The conference *Transvergence and Francophone Cinema* took place at the Institut Français in London on 19 April 2006. Some of the conference proceedings were then collected in *Studies in French Cinema* 7, no.2 (2007), including Higbee, “Beyond the (Trans)National,” 79-91; Brown, “Sabotage or Espionage?,” 93-106; Goddard, “East-West European Superpositions as Transvergent Cinema,” 107-117; Martin, “Transvergence and Cultural Detours,” 119-129.

⁷⁹ Higbee, “Beyond the (Trans)National,” 85.

⁸⁰ Kaplan, *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, 1-9.

of power from within the nation itself. By defying such mechanisms, cinema of transvergence takes into consideration hitherto unexpressed agencies, which are mobilised in turn to reveal their transnational potential both at the inter-national and the polylocal levels. However, unlike some strands of the transnational analysis, the transvergent framework does not place border-crossing phenomena within an unspecified globalised framework. Instead, it roots its analysis in historically specific and culturally consistent grounds. Acknowledging this historical-cultural specificity means still considering the national as an active agent in the field; in other words, the national – as an emotional structure of feeling, a cultural bond and a historical identity – is not lost and still deserves to be taken into account in all its guises from a critically informed post-national perspective. As previously suggested, this post-national specificity has not to be conceived in a homogenising way though. Using the vocabulary of the rhizome, cinema of transvergence does not reduce the national to a single hegemonic centre, but rather envisions it as a combination of multiple centres, multiple voices and multiple projects, which work concurrently within a heterogeneous space. In Novak's terms, this heterogeneous space takes the form of an 'alien archipelago' and the fragmented centres constitute its scattered islands. Therefore, I suggest understanding this 'alien archipelago' as a revised transvergent version of the old concept of nation: an archipelago is fluid if not even floating, it has no clear borders nor fixed shape, and it is permanently in a process of mutation, constantly subject to the action of unforeseeable waves and inevitable tides. Its multiple centres, its islands, constitute discrete sites of truth that can variously interact and be linked to each other by means of vectors of analysis moving on discontinuous paths and taking multiple directions. Whilst attempting these connections, cinema of transvergence dynamically evaluates the discontinuities and imbalances in the transaction, namely, those existing between filmmakers and their different cultural identities, film cultures, and film industries. In this regard, cinema of transvergence aims to avoid an unproductive binary contrast between opposing referents (in the first place between the national-local and the transnational-global) and rather seeks to understand how continuities and discontinuities can meaningfully occupy the same analytical space. To sum up, acting through the open-ended possibilities of the rhizome, the meaning of cinema of transvergence is to account for a given object of investigation within a fruitful "transcultural cinematic 'network' [that] is never fixed, [but] always under negotiation, always in a process of becoming".⁸¹

Higbee's specific use of the transvergent paradigm points to a critical reappraisal of postcolonial and diasporic filmmaking. More specifically, the scholar connects his proposition to Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity, which is seen as a "process of becoming – not fixed in some predetermined past but constantly evolving and subject to the continuous play of

⁸¹ Higbee, "Beyond the (Trans)National," 85.

history, culture and power”.⁸² Higbee aims to demonstrate that the transvergent model can negotiate an intermediate position between the discursive realms of the national and the transnational, that is, a post-national analytical space in which to account more effectively for the hybrid cinematic identities of postcolonial and diasporic filmmakers. In his understanding, transvergence “might help us better describe how both postcolonial and diasporic cinema function not only across borders, nations and cultures but also within them [...] suggest[ing] the possibility that these marginal or ‘other-ed’ positionings [...] can therefore negotiate a position that is both centre and margin – and once again one that denies the totality of a binary epistemology”.⁸³ As Deleuze and Guattari put it, transvergence thus establishes a ‘logic of the AND’: films are understood within an analytical perspective that connects the multi-directional drives of the postcolonial/diasporic condition, considering these forces as complimentary rather than mutually exclusive.

The elective affinity between transvergence and postcolonial/diasporic concerns is further investigated in two recent book-length studies addressing North-African and Francophone postcolonial cinema. In her 2010 volume, *Re-Hybridizing Transnational Domesticity and Femininity: Women’s Contemporary Filmmaking and Lifewriting in France, Algeria, and Tunisia*, Stacey Weber-Fève rethinks the notion of third cinema from a transvergent perspective. To carry out her analysis of women’s cinematic (and literary) expressions in France and the North African Francophone world, the scholar employs transvergence as a notion that is able to “re-frame marginality as a point of resistance and allow for continuities as well as differences in national identity and integrity to exist side by side”.⁸⁴ Moreover, the author interestingly underlines the progressive attitude of the proposition, one that “privileges a forging ahead as opposed to a retreat into pre-existing cultural, familiar, or psychological identities and a priori social, historical, or political framework and discourses”.⁸⁵ Furthermore, drawing on Homi Bhabha’s notion of the third space, Weber-Fève theorises a ‘two-thirds space’ of negotiation, that is, an interstitial space in which the aesthetic aspirations of European ‘second cinema’ and the defining characteristics of ‘third cinema’ merge in transvergent connection and distinctively shape the films under analysis. In *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women’s Cinema* (2011), Florence Martin instead refashions Hamid Naficy’s proposition of ‘accented cinema’ through gendered, feminist lenses.⁸⁶ The aim of the scholar is to overcome the ambiguities that the prefix ‘post-’ bears in both postcolonial and poststructuralist analyses, and to rethink feminism as a transnational fluid space of cultural creation, one that is able to

⁸² Ibid., 86. Cf. Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.

⁸³ Higbee, “Beyond the (Trans)National,” 86

⁸⁴ Weber-Fève, *Re-Hybridizing Transnational Domesticity and Femininity*, xlvii.

⁸⁵ Ibid., xlvi.

⁸⁶ Cf. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*.

express a regional understanding outside of the conventional Eurocentric conceptions. To achieve her purposes, Martin applies transvergence to connect several analytical contexts, opening innovative fields of enquiry, such as that of transvergent spectatorship for instance. However, although both Weber-Fève and Martin offer pioneering applications of the transvergent approach, the model's potential for rhizomatic fluidity and alien hybridity could still be further elaborated. Both studies, in fact, substantially reconfigure the previous notions (third cinema, accented cinema), but also inevitably anchor their investigation to those same frameworks, limiting the transnational component of the films under analysis to the sum of its parts (multi-national funds, international crews, linguistic hybridity). As Martin puts it, transvergence is conceived here as a tool to "interpret the complications and idiosyncrasies" of the works under consideration.⁸⁷ However, to achieve a more fruitful application of transvergence, I suggest moving beyond the underlying misconception for which these 'complications' are basically anomalies within the system. Conversely, cinema of transvergence should acknowledge these 'idiosyncrasies' as symptomatic outcomes of an increasingly hybridising world.

Drifting away from postcolonial issues, a different attempt to apply cinema of transvergence has been undertaken by Pietari Kääpä in his 2011 book-length contribution, *The Cinema of Mika Kaurismäki: Transvergent Cinescapes, Emergent Identities*. The book aims to provide a fresh exploration of the works of Mika Kaurismäki, a Finnish Brazil-based director whose eclectic transnational production ranges from dramas to comedies to documentaries on world music. The author finds in Mika Kaurismäki an ideal object of investigation to discard the tenets of (Finnish) national cinema and to rethink him as a global auteur, who is constantly shifting between places, cultures and genres. To achieve this goal, Kääpä fruitfully applies transvergence to account for the contested issues of auteurism, genre, space, ethnography, national culture and film reception. In his words:

I use the concept of transvergence to imply a sense of constant transformation, where cultures, identities and societies are never stable, but always in flux, morphing into ever changing new formations. Transvergent cultural products that seek to capture this transformation do not necessarily gesture towards any sense of completion or stability, but reveal the very process of transformation, in all its insecurities, as a relevant social condition in its own right [...] The purpose of transvergence is to examine how these films formulate new conceptions and perspectives on these much-discussed ideas, situating their rhetorical structures in a sort of critical liminality that

⁸⁷ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, 25.

avoids any limiting connotation these pre-existing theoretical formulations may have.⁸⁸

Kääpä's application of transvergence is particularly inspiring as it proves how the model can flexibly address a variety of topics beyond the postcolonial/diasporic framework. More importantly, the scholar significantly highlights the transformative potential of the proposition. Following this approach, I suggest understanding Chinese film too in terms of cinema of transvergence as this paradigm not only works to radically 'unpack' Chineseness, but also provides a critical method to evaluate what actually happens inside this unpacked package.

2.3 ALLOGENESIS: TRANSVERGENT CHINESE CINEMA

Brief mentions of non-linear structures in the analysis of Chinese films have so far only been suggested with regard to the notion of the rhizome. In his study of postsocialist cinema in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Chris Berry uses the concept to maintain that "there are systems of order and there are areas or zones that work against the repressive structures of an order to open up difference and heterogeneity".⁸⁹ Whilst Berry makes reference to the rhizome to account for anti-hegemonic productions of meaning, Judith Perlin instead employs the notion to illustrate the fragmented circulation patterns of Chinese independent documentaries as well as the multiple possibilities of interpretation that they offer.⁹⁰ In both cases the rhizome is used as an almost visual illustration of the scholars' arguments, but its application is not taken as far as to constitute a comprehensive analytical proposition. More specifically, with regard to the concept of transvergence, the present dissertation possibly represents the first attempt to apply the model to the field of Chinese film studies. In particular, to effectively achieve this goal, I aim to stress the key concept of allogenesis from Novak's original theorisation, a notion whose relevance and agency remain underestimated even in the studies previously discussed.

To understand how allogenesis works when applied to film studies, it proves useful to move from Yiman Wang's attempt to rethink the transnational, not only as a theoretical model to understand cinematic products beyond the national, but also as a proper methodology. Wang first argues that, in transnational cinematic practices, borders do not disappear. More precisely, they are redefined, not as external impediments to be crossed, "but rather [as an] interiorized [...] self-demarcating and self-monitoring system that [...] is (re)activated at every step of

⁸⁸ Kääpä, *The Cinema of Mika Kaurismäki*, 17-18.

⁸⁹ Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, 20.

⁹⁰ Perlin, "Filming Space/Mapping Reality in Chinese Independent Documentary Films," 32-34.

negotiation between [...] the local Self and [...] the foreign Other”.⁹¹ In this negotiation, the scholar sees the transnational flux as subject to a process of ‘foreignizing translation’ in which both the national and the foreign components undergo extensive transformation to finally achieve a substantial rewriting of both parts.⁹² Although Wang’s study significantly focuses on the transformative aspects, the analysis still suggests a binary opposition between some indigenous self and its foreign counterpart. From a transvergent perspective, the distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ cannot be so sharp because, within an alien archipelago, one object is concurrently itself and another, and constantly morphs into new alien forms, which are in turn already alien in themselves.⁹³ This process exactly describes the mechanism of allogenesi s and its uninterrupted production of alien forms, that is, ‘interbeings’ with no beginning and no end, which are subject to constant metamorphosis. Furthermore, allogenesi s in this context does not limit its agency to the objects of analysis but, as an all-infective process, affects the researcher’s subject and his/her means of investigation as well. This approach in fact requires an interrogation of our own critical positionality as transvergence unveils “the necessity of re-thinking conventional perceptions about the directions and modes of global cultural flows, and about the patterns of knowledge production and transmission between the global ‘East’/‘South’ and ‘West’/‘North’”.⁹⁴ Accordingly, although the innovative application of different theorisations within the model is strongly encouraged, the imposition of hegemonic readings over practices developing in other cultural contexts invalidates the paradigm and hence must be avoided. Transvergence invites us to rethink our theoretical and analytical practices in the spirit of a restless allogenesi s. To illustrate this idea, Paul Willemen’s use of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ‘creative understanding’ proves illuminating: “it is not simply a matter of engaging a ‘dialogue’ with some other culture’s products but of using one’s understanding of another cultural practice to re-perceive and rethink one’s own cultural constellation at the same time”.⁹⁵

To test ‘foreignizing translation’ as a method of reading, Wang addresses the formal aspects of a specific transnational production (namely, the Hong Kong remake of a Lubitsch’s musical comedy). By recognising a defined set of local aesthetic features and a number of foreign elements concurrently at work, the analysis dissects the film’s overall stylistic composition in

⁹¹ Wang, “The ‘transnational’ as methodology”, 11.

⁹² Wang borrows the concept of ‘foreignizing translation’ from Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility*.

⁹³ An effective illustration of this idea can be provided, for instance, by Thomas Elsaesser’s remark on the perception of Hollywood mainstream cinema from a non-Hollywood perspective: “Hollywood can hardly be conceived [...] as totally other, since so much of any nation’s culture is implicitly ‘Hollywood’.” Elsaesser, “Chronicle of a Death Retold,” 166.

⁹⁴ Ferrari, “Journey(s) to the East,” 362. In the original article, Ferrari’s argument refers to the application of the rhizome as a theoretical model. However, as the transvergent approach is rooted in a rhizomatic structure, the quoted statement can in fact be applicable to transvergence as well.

⁹⁵ Willemen, “The National,” 30. See also Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 29-30.

terms of the incongruity between these two groups of elements. Their aesthetics, which belongs to the national or non-national spheres, are presented as readily discernable and their connection, or rather opposition, is investigated to illustrate the film's multiple modes of address, that is, the direction in which the filmic discourse attempts to move the audience.⁹⁶ However, such an approach fails to effectively account for the complexity of film styles, and even more so in this specific case which shows an apparent aesthetic hybridity. More generally, here lies one of the major limitations of the transnational model: whilst effective for the investigation of issues of film production, circulation and consumption, it proves inadequate when undertaking a comprehensive analysis of film styles and aesthetics. The former set of questions refers to a series of practical concerns that can be empirically verified: where do the productions funds come from? Where is this film shown and to what effect? Who is watching this film? Conversely, to address matters of film style and aesthetics, more abstract procedures need to be followed: for the directorial choices of a filmmaker, invariably rooted in a specific discursive and historical-cultural ground, no assured answers can be retrieved from technical credits or box office reports. Accordingly, to account for a filmmaker's relationship with his/her national (film) history, transnational fascinations, consciousness of the cinematic medium, and broader worldviews, we need to undertake an investigation that shows greater fluidity. In this respect, the multi-directional proposition of transvergence, working through the transformative understanding of allogeneis, possibly constitutes a more effective model. Accordingly, I understand the subjects of my research – namely, stylistic developments in contemporary Chinese cinema – as creative processes of allogeneis producing novel alien forms, that is, new aesthetic articulations variously connected to previous and concurrent, indigenous and foreign practices, which are under constant transformation.

By applying this framework to the analysis of film realism in particular, transvergence relevantly intervenes in a broader debate involving questions of nation and Chineseness. Focusing on film realism in the context of PRC cinema implies addressing what, for a number of reasons including both cultural and political motivations, has been identified as the main style in PRC film historiographies, to the extent that the realist style largely coincided with the very idea of national cinema in that specific context. The overlap between the concepts of realism and the national is consistently scrutinised by Rey Chow (who tackles the topic from a literary perspective, but her arguments apply to film nonetheless). In a wider investigation of the political and cultural strategies deployed to grant cohesion to the PRC nation-state, the scholar focuses, on the one hand, on the standardisation of the Chinese language through the

⁹⁶ The concept of mode of address is investigated in Willemsen, "The National Revisited".

imposition of the Mandarin dialect and, on the other hand, on the implementation of specific politics of style for cultural products. Regarding this latter point, Chow argues:

Third World nations such as China have actually been *coerced into a kind of mimeticism*, a kind of collective linguistic/stylistic mandate under which writing has to be reflectionist, has to be an authentic copy of the nation's reality. From the standpoint of the Chinese state, it was as if Chineseness had, in the twentieth century, become the burden of an ethnicity that was marginalized to the point of unintelligibility – and the only way to be intelligible, to regain recognition in a world perpetually ignorant of and indifferent to Chinese history, is by going realist and mimetic: to institute, officially, that writing corresponds faithfully to the life of the Chinese nation as an ethnic unit [...] Mimeticism here is no longer simply a literary convention, however. Rather, it is a type of representational copulation forced at the juncture between literature and ethnicity, a reflectionism that explicitly or implicitly establishes equivalence between a cultural practice and an ethnic label – in the form of “this kind of poetic/narrative convention *is* Chinese”.⁹⁷

Rey Chow convincingly unveils the historical mechanism through which the national discourse took possession of realism. I suggest that the application of transvergence at the same juncture between cinema/realism and ethnicity/Chineseness could help discharge that hegemonic configuration. On the one hand, by unleashing the national-realist connection, Chineseness could be appreciated “in terms of the permanently evolving mutations internal to the invocation of ethnicity itself”.⁹⁸ In other words, Chineseness could be understood transvergently as caught in a process of continuous allogenesis, producing constantly modifying (and multiplying and scattering and hybridising) versions of itself. On the other hand, the hegemonic discourses could be dismantled at two levels: the historiographic and the stylistic. For instance, by applying a transvergent look at the history of PRC cinema in retrospect, the standard film narratives could be substantially rediscussed (an enterprise possibly not devoid of political relevance). In fact, conventional historiographies usually present the development of the national film production as a logical sequence of self-contained realist traditions following one another with an almost Darwinian precision: leftist cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, socialist realist filmmaking during the Maoist era (1950s to 1970s), the so-called Fifth Generation of the 1980s, and then the so-called Sixth or Urban Generation of the 1990s. Transvergence, instead, would take into consideration a broader and contested cinematic environment in which

⁹⁷ Chow, “Introduction,” 14-15. Original emphasis.

⁹⁸ Chow, “Introduction,” 7.

alternative voices make their claims both at the national and the transnational levels. By illustrating the interaction between different factors and subjects, transvergence thus aims to rethink the perspectives of Chinese cinema and shed light on under-explored logics and connections. Moreover, the shift from one version of realism to another would no longer be understood as a clear-cut handover between film styles. Conversely, it would be explained in terms of unceasing allo-genetic activity, thus underlining the hybrid negotiations, discontinuities and fragmentations in the making of new, and invariably spurious, alien stylistic forms. By placing the object of enquiry within a network of rhizomatic interplays, transvergence significantly focuses on the remnants of previous styles and practices that, unlike the evaluation of conventional historiographies, do not disappear overnight but still affect the newly formed alien style. This degree of influence and interplay cannot be evaluated a priori, but rather requires an ad-hoc analysis that takes into close consideration the specific historical and cultural context in which the alien is produced: as Sheldon Lu would say, the alien is not a phantom object. For all of these reasons, realism cannot be conceived as a pure and absolute statement. On the contrary, through the lenses of transvergence, it will be exposed in its fundamental hybridity, in translinear tension with other forms of expressions, dwelling in a constitutive uncertainty that never allows for reaching a fully finished shape, and that creates meaning just because of it.

In this chapter, I presented a critical survey of the main analytical models in Chinese film studies. My purpose was to expose their limitations in order to understand the critical gaps that need to be filled. Both in the conventional national cinema model and the several applications of the transnational approach, the major critical uneasiness seemed to concern the understanding of the national, a complex notion concurrently expressing historical identity, the cultural heritage, and a structure of feeling. I attempted to discard the hegemonic construction of the concept (overlapping with that of Chineseness in this specific case), without erasing it. Therefore, by adopting a post-national perspective, I aimed to acknowledge the lingering power of the national while rethinking it in fluid and contested terms, that is, as a multiplicity of projects under constant hybridisation. Hence, first substantiating the claims for the institution of comparative film studies as a critical discipline, I introduced cinema of transvergence as an effective framework for my analysis. The transvergent approach examines how, within a specific historical-cultural network, multi-directional factors combine to heterogeneously shape a given object of enquiry. In particular, through the distinctive process of allo-genesis, the inherently transformative and fundamentally hybrid nature of this object (named 'alien' in the jargon of the proposition) is appreciated. Dismantling the hegemonic understanding and encouraging the

circulation of interdisciplinary knowledge, transvergence proves to have wider applicability than the previous models, including to matters of film styles and aesthetics. In the Chinese case, more specifically, it rethinks the connection between realism and the national, and reconsiders the logics of its stylistic progression.

However, transvergence does not map an anarchic space in which unqualified arguments float in the absence of any form of gravity. On the contrary, the post-national context of reference, expressing the enduring presence of the national, must be carefully taken into consideration before proceeding with close analyses of its cultural products. Accordingly, the following chapter frames the research within a specific historical-cultural archipelago: on the one hand, it contextualises realism in the history of Chinese film; and on the other hand, it painstakingly describes postsocialism as the overarching historical phase of contemporary China.

CHAPTER 2

TOWARDS THE IMPOSSIBLE

“Communities are to be distinguished [...] by the style in which they are imagined.”
(Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6)

“Chinese thought was always postmodern because it never bother to become modern.”
(Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 170-71)

China is a complex field of enquiry that defiantly escapes any precast theorisation loosely developed with reference to Euro-American environments. In many significant instances, received notions traditionally employed to describe the historical developments and cultural achievements of Western societies prove largely inapplicable to the Chinese context. In the last few decades, the fast-paced transformations and contradictory changes affecting the PRC have further complicated the effort to account for the country's present condition. How can established notions be productively re-theorised to respond to the particularities of the Chinese case? How can we effectively describe the historical condition of contemporary China? How does contemporary cultural production relate to this distinctive historical background?

Realism is the first concept to be tested against the Chinese post-national framework. As a Western construct whose exact theoretical purchase remains a source of dispute even in its original environment, realism is not a notion that can be taken for granted or automatically applied to any historical-cultural context in some predetermined fashion. Hence this chapter first presents a broad historical survey from the introduction of realism into China in the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century up to 1989. On the one hand, this examination shows that “realism was always more a political/philosophical notion than a set of stylistic renderings in Chinese art/literary circles”.¹ On the other hand, it highlights a constitutive feature of realism in China: its invariably hybrid and constantly changing nature. Before moving to a comprehensive analysis of realism in the post-1989 era in the following chapter, the discussion here will illustrate the historical-cultural framework of contemporary China. Following Zhang Yiwu's description of the Post-New Period, a second key concept will be tested against Chinese conditions, namely postmodernism. In this respect, the analysis aims to theorise a working notion of postsocialism as the distinctive Chinese variant of postmodernism. On the one hand, the discussion rethinks the postmodern state of fragmentation in terms of positive pluralisation;

¹ Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, 199.

on the other hand, seen at the juncture of several incomplete projects of modernity, Chinese postsocialism is described as productively unfinished. The chapter argues that this unfinished potential allows a fundamental multiplication of meaning and displays an effort of signification to decode the complexity of contemporary reality. The historical-cultural background marked by such an unfinished pluralisation thus represents the post-national alien archipelago in the context of which the allo-genetic developments of the *jishizhuyi* style will be accounted for in the following chapters.

1. CHINESE REALISMS: SYNTHESIS OF CHANGES

1.1 OBSERVATION AND IMAGINATION

Realism did not originate in China, but was imported from the West in two main phases: first, during the attempt at national restoration (*jiuguo*) in the late Qing period; and, second, after 1919 in the wake of the May Fourth movement.

Traumatized by the defeats on its own territory in the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60) and the Sino-Japanese conflict (1894-95), China started dreaming of a new society. This was ideally based on the culture of the victorious West, and variously linked to principles of cultural dynamism, intellectual autonomy, scientific development, social progress, and democracy. Late Qing reformers such as Liang Qichao were persuaded that these changes in Chinese society should begin with literature.² However, although Chinese translations of European nineteenth-century novels had appeared since the beginning of the twentieth century, their reception had not found a homogenous response among readers. Classics by Lev Tolstoy, Charles Dickens, Alexandre Dumas, and Honoré de Balzac, for instance, became immediately popular. Presented in classic prose (*wenyan*), these editions were often curated by Lin Shu, a major cultural figure of the period, who introduced Western literature to a whole generation of Chinese readers. As Lin had no knowledge of foreign languages and thus had to rely on other collaborators to decode the original texts, these works were rewritten rather than translated, and thus presented all the formal habits expected by the Chinese reader (third-person narration, author's direct commentary, descriptive clichés).³ On the other hand, translations of contemporary realist

² See Liang, "Xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi."

³ To mention but a few significant examples, in Alexandre Dumas' *The Lady of the Camellias* (*La dame aux camellias*, 1852) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894), the original first-person narration was replaced by a third-person narration that allowed the 'translator' to comment generously on the story. Moreover, portrayals of backgrounds and natural sceneries were often cut off and replaced by stereotyped descriptions. Also, the traditional ending line, "If you want to know what will

writers such as Guy de Maupassant, Anton Čechov, Oscar Wilde, and Henryk Sienkiewicz, although undertaken with rigorous professionalism, were largely unsuccessful.⁴ These difficulties in reception already testify to the impossibility of an unmediated cultural translation. Importing foreign literary styles proved a complex operation because Western and Chinese aesthetic philosophies hardly move along comparable paths. As for realism, the major issue at stake was the concept of mimesis. The Western mimetic tradition is rooted in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle and sees the accurate imitation of reality as a central principle to evaluate a work of art. Quoting a famous passage from Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (*Le Rouge et le noir*, 1830), the (realist) novel is like a "mirror walking down the road". The mirror represents the work of art as a reflection of the external world and its frame sets up a specific spatiotemporal focalisation through which the author undertakes his (objective) observation. On the contrary, mimesis as an aesthetic theory has never developed in China. Hence the "object of art" was not understood as "a copy of the natural world but one of the many manifestations of the fundamental patterns that underlie both the natural and social worlds".⁵ Referring to the image of the mirror, Marston Anderson contends that, in the Chinese case, it equates with "the mind of the author, who through contemplation rids himself of a clouded subjectivity and opens himself as a free channel to the Dao".⁶ Such an interpretation implies that the strict focalisation of the Western model is not necessarily granted in the Chinese context and that, rather, the author is allowed to express himself by adopting multiple viewpoints.⁷ As traditional expressive theories illustrate, the purpose of the Chinese artist is not to provide a materialistic depiction of the external world. As a vessel through which the *dao* manifests itself, the artist aims to give a sense of the universe's underlying principles and arouse in the art consumer the same variety of emotions that inspired the work's creation. In this respect, scholars have often debated the neo-Confucian concept of *gewu* (investigation of things) as the Chinese counterpart of the Western Enlightenment idea of the individual as a platform for objective observation. However, Anderson contends that, once again, more than a mimetic rendering of the external reality, the notion implies a spiritual identification with things within the author's subjective process of moral self-cultivation.⁸ Besides these aesthetic impediments, the cultural translation of realism into China during these years was further complicated by its proponents' expectations. By pointing out the

happen next, please go to the next chapter" was commonly added. Wong, *An Act of Violence*, 34-35. See also McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, 9-10.

⁴ McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, 9-10.

⁵ Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 12. For a discussion of mimesis in the Chinese context, see Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 47-53.

⁶ Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 15.

⁷ Anderson mentions, for instance, the traditional Chinese rhapsody *fu*, in which the author approaches his subject from a wide range of perspectives to accomplish a comprehensive description of it. *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-15. For a discussion of Chinese traditional expressive theories, see Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 63-87.

oxymoronic nature of the term 'realist fiction', Anderson contends that "the Western mimetic project [...] assumes a fundamental schism between word and reality" so that "realism as practiced in the West generally contents itself with the re-examination and reaffirmation of that gap, offering readers an aesthetic consolation rather than a pragmatic instruction in life".⁹ Conversely, realism was adopted in China not for its mimetic proposition, but for its association with ideals of practical intervention and cultural regeneration in times of national emergency.

The perceived need to import Western literature intensified with the events of 4 May 1919 when, in reaction to the Versailles Peace Treaty, a large protest movement called for a radical regeneration of the whole country.¹⁰ To foster the progress of a new society, the New Culture Movement (*xin wenhua yundong*) widely imported foreign literature with the purpose of opposing the traditional literary corpus, deemed inadequate, by means of the 'successful' Western thought. As the country opened its doors to the West, literary currents that had taken more than a century to develop in Europe (mainly realism and romanticism in their various forms) were introduced all at once. By pointing out the uneasy coexistence of these different literary traditions, which intellectuals have variously interpreted and associated with a range of social ideals, Bonnie McDougall argues that "Chinese writers [...] failed to perceive the historical differences between them".¹¹ Moreover, these misperceptions possibly sharpened a preceding condition since also "among Western scholars the precise nature and definition of these [...] traditions was (and perhaps still is) a source of considerable confusion, and this confusion was also transmitted into China".¹² Realism represents the major proposition in this context, for it was hailed as the most advanced expression in the evolutionary development of Western literary genres, a vehicle for cultural transformation and social reforms that could save China from backwardness.¹³ Understood both as a descriptive technique and a philosophical attitude,

⁹ Ibid., 200-01.

¹⁰ At the end of World War I, the Versailles Peace Treaty transferred German concessions in the Shandong province to Japan. The Chinese people felt that this resolution was a humiliation perpetrated by the West and the Japanese government to their detriment.

¹¹ McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, 54. To describe this critical confusion, Lu Xun ironically comments: "The fearful thing about the Chinese literary scene is that everyone keeps introducing new terms without defining them. And everyone interprets these terms as he pleases. To write a good deal about yourself is expressionism. To write largely about others is realism. To write poems on a girl's leg is romanticism. To ban poems on a girl's leg is classicism." Cited in Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 1.

¹² McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, 54. With reference to realism, for instance, René Wellek demonstrates that this notion does not present a unified philosophical affiliation in Western literary theory either. Its interpretations range from Émile Zola's materialistic understanding of naturalism, to Erich Auerbach's combination of existentialism and historicism, and György Lukács' ideological 'types', to mention but a few notable ones. See Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*.

¹³ McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, 54-55. The idea of the evolutionary superiority of realism was borrowed by English critic Richard Green Moulton, whose *The Modern Study of Literature: An Introduction to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (1915) was very popular among New Culture intellectuals. Moulton applies Darwin's evolutionary theory to literature: equating the literary process to the evolution of the species, literary criticism is seen as an observation and

realism in China was often equated with naturalism, and generally described as a narrow or scientific version of it. It coexisted with Victorian romanticism, which was connected not only to the cause of national liberation, individualism and democracy, but also to primitivism and irrationality, a reason why it gradually lost appeal in times requiring a more practical intervention. The theoretical confusion generated by the concurrent introduction of these two concepts is best represented by the proposition of neo-romanticism, which the Chinese interpreted as an intermediate form that combined romantic and realist features. Neo-romanticism was first advocated by one of the key Chinese intellectuals of the time, Shen Yanbing, who is better known by his pseudonym Mao Dun. Although he would revise his viewpoint just a few years later, in the heyday of the New Culture Movement, Mao Dun refused an overtly mechanistic approach to literature, criticising the kind of objective realism proposed after Émile Zola's naturalistic criticism.¹⁴ In his own words:

When creating a literature, the power of observation and the power of imagination are both essential and should be balanced [...] Descriptions of ugliness do have artistic value, but they only show one side of life, and cannot be considered as completely true representations. The work of Western post-realism neo-romantics is able to combine observation and imagination, and represent life in synthesis. This advanced stage of art and theory must be continually kept in mind by creative artists.¹⁵

Similarly, in a long article entitled "Shiren yu laodong wenti" (Poets and the Labour Problem, 1920), Tian Han attempts a synthesis between naturalism and romanticism by applying the principles of evolutionary theory. Combining romantic features (the expression of private feelings, sympathy for the unprivileged, and an impulse towards social reforms, democracy, and humanitarianism) and realist elements (environmental determinism, a thorough description of material reality, and an interest in the lives of the lower social classes), Tian defines his idea of neo-romanticism as a blend of sentimental idealism, expressive linguistic choices, and concern

interpretation of literature just like science is an observation and interpretation of the natural world. See *ibid.*, 71-75. A similar approach is shown in *The contemporary literary movements (Le mouvement littéraire contemporain)* by Georges Pellissier (1902). The French critic's deterministic argument for which romanticism developed from classicism and realism developed from romanticism in turn, strongly impacted Chinese social reformers, who found a supposedly scientific justification for their literary theorisations. See *ibid.*, 147-48.

¹⁴ Gálik, *Mao Dun and Modern Chinese Literary Criticism*, 80.

¹⁵ Cited in McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, 181-82. As David Wang puts it, Mao Dun's literary vision "represents a strange amalgam of at least four sources: Zola's deterministic view of the human condition, Tolstoy's yearning for religious epiphany and metamorphosis, the Chinese Communist ideal of volitionism, and elite Confucian didacticism in the radical guise of political novel". Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*, 70.

for the troubled existence of the Chinese people.¹⁶ From its first introduction into China, realism was thus already a hybrid notion.

1.2 MELODRAMATIC REALISM

During the years in which realism was being introduced into China, literature and cinema were developing on different binaries at different speeds: the former was considered as a proper art form, the latter as a new invention pertaining more to the commercial than the artistic sphere. Accordingly, the May Fourth system of ideas, to which realism was connected, had a limited influence on the Chinese film industry in the 1910s and 1920s. Nevertheless, by the mid-1920s, works by Dumas, Ibsen, Maupassant, Molière, and Wilde had been adapted for the silver screen and a few prominent May Fourth intellectuals (including Tian Han, Hong Shen, and Ouyang Yuqian) were involved in filmmaking, writing scripts and directing films. However, although realist topics such as women's rights, criticisms of warlords, and working class hardships appeared in a limited number of works, "none of this added up to a May Fourth-type revolution in the film world".¹⁷ This was due to two reasons: on the one hand, cinema was mainly a commercial enterprise addressing audiences with traditional tastes, hence room for complexity and artistic refinement was limited; on the other hand, as the Guomindang government was consolidating its social consensus in the urban areas under the flag of a Confucian-inspired nationalism, the anti-traditionalist themes of the May Fourth movement proved difficult to introduce.¹⁸

The May Fourth spirit belatedly reached the Chinese film industry in the early 1930s, first crystallising in the formula known as 'social realism'. A number of young filmmakers (including Bu Wancang, Cai Chusheng, Shi Dongshan, Sun Yu and Zhu Shilin), recruited by the Lianhua Film Company, started exploring a full range of pressing social issues in their works. However, although presenting reformist aesthetics and apparent political implications, these filmmakers were more concerned with the expression of their subjective understanding of reality than with a revolutionary agenda. Delivered in sentimental and idealistic terms, social realism identified "a committed art burdened with ethical and emotional weight but not necessarily with doctrinaire propaganda".¹⁹ Social and political commitment took a more

¹⁶ McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, 88-108. In this regard, the work of Danish critic Georg Brandes, that shows a fundamentally romantic conception of realism and naturalism, was very influential in China at the time. See *ibid.*, 77-79.

¹⁷ Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," 298.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 299-300.

¹⁹ Lee, "The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema," 8.

interventionist stance in a concurrent development of film realism in China, named 'critical realism' – and this testifies to the fact that there had never been only one realism, but several, even simultaneous, versions of it. Following the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931 and the attack of Shanghai in 1932, the Mingxing Film Company started producing a number of films based on scripts by May Fourth leftist intellectuals, such as Hong Shen, Qian Xingcun, Tian Han, Xia Yan, Yan Hansheng and Zheng Boqi. "It is with the serious films produced mainly at Mingxing that the tradition of 'socially conscious' cinema was first established" and that "the experience of film-watching becomes not merely a way of emotional catharsis but also a form of social and political commitment."²⁰ In other words, unlike social realism, critical realism relied on an active political agenda, "a revolutionary aesthetic based on Marxism-Leninism and social nationhood, with a different view of national transformation and survival from social realism".²¹

Despite their different ideological engagement, at the cinematic level both social and critical realism mediated foreign cultural imports and indigenous conventions: on the one hand, "the imported socialist ideology, that valued objectivity and political actions"; on the other hand, "the inherited narrative tradition, that was characterized by a heavy sentimentalism".²² This negotiation chose melodrama (variously translated as *qingjieju*, *tongsuju*, *shangyipian* or *wenyipian*) as the privileged mode of realist expression, despite it standing at the opposite side of realism in terms of classic film theory. Departing from May Fourth's complexity in social investigation, this realist configuration recalls the classic American melodrama (D. W. Griffith was well known in China at the time) and, more generally, nineteenth-century European realist literature. In fact, all of these forms rely on similar narrative mechanisms such as moral polarisation, the rejection of contradictions, and heightened emotionalism. Accordingly, the viewer's engagement with the cinematic text is not structured through a process of psychological identification but rather, is presented as an emotionally-charged experience. As Pang Laikwan argues, "it is not the conflation between the representation and the reality that determines the degree of spectators' identification of cinema. Instead, it is the coherence and the solidarity of its narrativity and its emotion that authenticates the film as a realistic representation of the human's world".²³ In other words, what counts is not strictly mimesis, but a subjective investigation of things pointing to the transfer of certain ideas and emotions from the producer to the consumer. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that melodrama itself, a genre already well-rooted in the Chinese film industry, underwent an (allogenic) process of

²⁰ Ibid., 7, 15. See also Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," 298-99.

²¹ Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 78.

²² Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, 201.

²³ Ibid., 213-14. See also, in this same volume, 200-203; and Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," 302-08.

transformation in connection to realism. As Paul Pickowicz underlines, whilst “the melodrama of the twenties often had conservative social implications,” in the following two decades May Fourth intellectuals working in the film industry “wanted to force the genre to serve revolutionary political ends”.²⁴ Realism thus continues to represent a hybrid and evolving notion. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar understand this in historical terms and contend that it was “the utopian quest to make China a modern nation-state” that “impel[led] cinematic realism to become a mixed mode”.²⁵ This hybridity would soon show its practical, political motivation: through melodramatic emotions, basic Marxist ideas could be easily transmitted to the audience.

1.3 THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TRUTH

Marxism spread in China after 1927, when the Nationalists broke their alliance with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In contrast to his previous neo-romantic positions, Mao Dun expressed new critical ideas: a disregard of Western literature, a harsh attack on romantic attitudes, and praise for a pure analytic method and materialist theories.²⁶ In the same spirit, Qian Xingcun advocated ‘proletarian realism’ (*puluo xianshizhuyi*), a formulation that was distinct from the bourgeois May Fourth realism on the basis of a strong refusal of any class compromise.²⁷ However, such radical positions would not remain untouched for long and, once again, a syncretic composition took centre stage. When the League of Left-Wing Writers (*zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*) was created in 1930, its most influential theorist, Qu Qiubai, mediated again between the materialist and romantic poles of realism and, similarly, Marxist critic Zhou Yang regarded the antagonism between the two concepts as a mistake.²⁸ Nevertheless, under the progressive influence of Marxism, the understanding of what constitutes subjectivity underwent a significant change: whilst it had previously identified the author’s individual struggle to achieve a critical understanding of the society, now it coincided with the ideological rectitude of the artist. In other words, the representation of reality had to stem from a worldview that was ideologically correct and not necessarily the product of the author’s independent observation.²⁹ Aesthetically, the foreignness of the Marxist philosophy was counterbalanced by the 1938 slogan ‘return to national forms’ that actually officialised what had been a more or less conscious agency since the first introduction of realism into China, namely, the recourse to traditional

²⁴ Pickowicz, “Melodramatic Representation and the ‘May Fourth’ Tradition of Chinese Cinema,” 304.

²⁵ Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 79.

²⁶ Mao, “Shenme shi wenxue?”

²⁷ Qian, “Zhongguo xinxing wenxue zhong de ji ge juti de wenti.”

²⁸ Zhou, “Xianshizhuyi shilun.”

²⁹ Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 56-57.

indigenous forms to adapt realism to the Chinese context. As Qu Qiubai explains with his concept of 'mass literature' (*dazhong wenxue*), the adoption of conventional forms (popular songs, oral storytelling) re-modelled in realist-Marxist fashion, helped disseminate the new ideological principles more easily among the masses.³⁰ In a more general context, this principle is aptly illustrated by Nelson Goodman:

What constitutes realism of representation? Surely not any sort of resemblance to reality. The touchstone of realism: not in quantity of information, but in how easily it issues. Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time. Newer or older or alien systems are accounted artificial or unskilled [...] Realistic representation, in brief, depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation. [...] If representation is a matter of choice and correctness a matter of information, realism is a matter of habit."³¹

A similar mechanism informed the Chinese reception of the notion of socialist realism (*shehuizhuyi de xianshizhuyi*) too. Introduced from the Soviet Union in 1933 by Zhou Yang, the term had, at first, a limited resonance in China: being a foreign concept that had arisen from the specific conditions of the USSR, Chinese intellectuals were discouraged from adopting it within an unprepared environment. The term was officially assimilated into the Chinese discourse only in 1952-53, and accordingly hailed as the highest revolutionary method to overcome Chinese backwardness in literature and the arts.³² However, as the relationship with the USSR was compromised after 1956, socialist realism had to be translated into an even more distinctive Chinese form. Hence, in 1958, the combined concept of 'revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism' (*geming xianshizhuyi yu geming langmanzhuyi*) was officially introduced to further promote the idealistic and utopian components of realism.³³ As René Wellek states, "in theory,

³⁰ Qu, "Dazhong wenyi de wenti."

³¹ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 34-38.

³² Zhou, "'Guanyu 'shehuizhuyi de xianshizhuyi yu geming de langmanzhuyi'". During the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art (*Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui*), Mao Zedong himself avoided the term 'socialist realism' and rather opted for 'proletarian realism'. This terminological choice was meant to draw a line between Mao's position and the ideas of the cadres returning from Moscow, where a relatively liberal trend in the arts was developing at that time. As the Propaganda Department later ratified the adoption of the term 'socialist realism', this replaced 'proletarian realism' in the 1953 reprint of Mao's Talks and in all of the subsequent editions. For an in-depth analysis of the reception and development of the concept of socialist realism in China, see Bichler, "Coming to Terms with a Term" and Yang, "'Socialist Realism' versus 'Revolutionary Realism plus Revolutionary Romanticism'".

³³ Zhou, "Xin mingde kaituo le shige de xin daolu". The following words from Zhou Yang are commonly taken as an exhaustive description of the concept: "The advancement of this artistic method is another important contribution of Comrade Mao Zedong to Marxist literary and artistic theory. He put forward this method in accordance with Marxist thought on the combination of the theory of uninterrupted revolution and the theory of the development of revolution by stages, in accordance with the developing rules of literature and art, and in accordance with the requirements of the present struggle. He applied

completely truthful representation of reality would exclude any kind of social purpose or propaganda”, but in this kind of realism, “the contradiction is confessed quite openly: the writer ought to describe it as it is but he must also describe it as it should or will be”.³⁴ Elevated to the status of official national aesthetics, this realism signalled, as Chen Xiaoming puts it, “the disappearance of truth”, as the artist “completely surrendered his subjectivity, identified with the Party and wrote accordingly”.³⁵ The masses were ideologically manipulated through a political vision of the arts as epitomised, for instance, by the notion of ‘type’ (*dianxing renwu*), namely, a character that embodies a full range of social ideals, and is both concrete in its didactic ends and transcendental in its larger-than-life stance. Replacing the individual protagonists of the May Fourth literature and their critical attitude, the type constitutes a “bridge between the present and the future, the real and the social ideal”.³⁶ The gap between extra-textual reality and the work of art is thus filled with pure ideological substance since “life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life”.³⁷ The real is thus neither ontological nor critically disputable: the real is just ideological. In the words of Zhou Yang:

As for ‘zhenshi’ [truth] and ‘realism’, we have a totally different understanding from the revisionists. Under the pretence of ‘zhenshi’ and ‘realism’, the revisionists usually oppose the tendentiousness of socialist literature and art [...]. Their so-called realism is ‘realism’ without progressive ideals, which is actually not realism but naturalism [...]. In class society, writers exclusively observe and describe reality with a certain class tendentiousness. It is only by keeping the progressive stand of class and people that writers can deeply understand and reflect the *zhenshi* of the time. *Zhenshi* and revolutionary tendentiousness are a unity in our understanding.³⁸

Interestingly, the syncretic attitude that had hitherto characterised the understanding of realism in China was exposed quite openly in the formulation of ‘revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism’. However, this was not only a generic combination of realist and

the principle of combining revolutionary mettle with a realistic spirit to literature and art, and dialectically unified the two artistic methods of realism and romanticism. The method is valuable for showing our time, assimilating completely our advanced literary heritage, and giving full play to writers’ and artists’ individual styles. It has thus opened up a vast and free field for socialist literature and art”. Translation in Yang, “‘Socialist Realism’ versus ‘Revolutionary Realism plus Revolutionary Romanticism’,” 93.

³⁴ Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, 242.

³⁵ Chen, “The Disappearance of Truth,” 159.

³⁶ Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, 242.

³⁷ Yang, “‘Socialist Realism’ versus ‘Revolutionary Realism plus Revolutionary Romanticism’,” 96.

³⁸ Cited in *ibid.*, 96. Original emphasis.

romantic elements. The overarching ideological agency of the adjective 'revolutionary', in fact, points to a deeper level of syncretism in which ontological truth and its contrary, that is, ideological tendentiousness, were sublimated in a unified formulation.

In the cinematic field, the socialist realist model presented an almost constant structure, which drew aesthetically from both classical Hollywood cinema (despite the fact that Western films were gradually banned after the 1950s) and Soviet socialist realist cinema. At the same time, filmmakers were encouraged to localise their films by adopting motifs from popular arts and culture. Strongly relying on editing techniques, these films built on linear narratives, presenting simplified social issues that were recounted with ideologically-charged pathos. The theatrical quality of their mise-en-scene is highly emphasised as the camera remains relatively static to portray full-faced characters playing dialogue-filled scenes. Images are characterised by a heightened degree of glossiness, in which the refusal of naturalistic renderings is functional to the presentation of characters as types rather than as individuals. Peasants, workers and soldiers are thus depicted not as vehicles for that sentimentalism and humanism that characterised pre-socialist cinema, but as banners of the Communist revolution.³⁹ In a context in which subjective desires are repressed and daily life is politicised, the old melodramatic form changes its configuration too. The genre remains functional to state politics both for its representational strategies (moral polarisation, and heightened emotionalism) and local flavour, but, interestingly, the mode was not adopted for films set in contemporary times. Traditionally, melodrama has been employed in films presenting critical views of the society. Since there was no reason to criticise the current one, it was thus better confined to works set in the previous, ideologically-deviant Republic era.⁴⁰

1.4 A NEW PERIOD

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 put an end to the splendour and terror of Maoism, a socialist utopia that under the guise of evocative slogans and movements – Hundred Flowers Campaign (*bai hua yundong*), Great Leap Forward (*da yue jin*), Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*wuchan jieji wenhua da geming*) – had roughly spanned a period of three decades (1949-76). The interreign of Mao's designate successor Hua Guofeng (1976-80) could not repeat the charisma of the previous leadership. However, the years immediately following the death of Chairman Mao were crucially important for the future of the PRC, mostly because they

³⁹ For analyses of Chinese cinema in the Maoist years, see Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 189-224; and Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, 56-118.

⁴⁰ Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," 313-15.

welcomed the return onto the political scene of Deng Xiaoping, who had suffered political purges and marginalisation during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) despite being a prominent spokesperson of the CCP since the 1920s.

In 1978, a New Period (*xin shiqi*) officially started. Deng launched his programme of the Four Modernisations (*si ge xiandaihua*) that, as part of a larger economic reforms effort (*gaige kaifang*, literally 'reform and opening up'), aimed to revitalise the national economy after the stagnation of the Maoist era.⁴¹ The withdrawal of state subsidies from many social and economic areas of the nation, the removal of centralised distribution systems, and the progressive abandonment of collective farming, encouraged the establishment of private entrepreneurship and the institution of 'free markets' (*ziyou shichang*). Capitalist elements were introduced into a nominally socialist country to loosen the net of the Maoist socialist economy in order to create an oxymoronic 'socialist market economy' (*shehuizhuyi shichang jingji*) or, to put it differently (and even more ambiguously), a 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (*Zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi*). This formula describes the current economic and political status of the PRC: a country that identifies itself politically with socialism, but that materially sustains itself by carrying out capitalist practices.⁴² However, the New Period did not prove to be 'new' only in the socio-economic realm as the cultural sector also underwent a season of 'high culture fever,' to use Wang Jing's definition.⁴³ Within a lively environment of unprecedented expressive freedom, together with the benefits from the import of foreign cultural products and stimuli, the country experienced a decade of intellectual enlightenment (*qimeng*) and artistic renaissance. After the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution and three decades of Maoist obscurantism, Chinese intellectuals resumed the discourse of modernity left unfinished by the May Fourth Movement and embarked on a humanist project of searching for and reconstructing a lost national self. Similarly, Chinese artists moved from their personal experiences to expose the lingering trauma of their recent past. Combining historical narration and personal introspection, they showed a renewed preoccupation with human nature, breaking away from ideology to focus on the inner life of the individual. Different literary waves coexisted in the 1980s: scar literature (*shanghen wenxue*), addressing the suffering of Party cadres and intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution; modernist or avant-garde literature (*xianfeng wenxue*), which radically experimented with language to create stylised narratives; and root-seeking literature (*xungen wenxue*), which pursued cultural identity in a world suspended

⁴¹ The Four Modernisations are agriculture, industry, national defence, and technology. They were originally conceived by Zhou Enlai in 1963 as goals to rejuvenate the national economy at the time.

⁴² For reference studies on socialist market economy and economic reforms in the 1980s, see Suliman, *China's Transition to a Socialist Market Economy*; Gao, *Two Decades of Reform in China*; Garnaut and Huang, *Growth without Miracles*; Chu, *Chinese Capitalisms*.

⁴³ Wang, *High Culture Fever*.

between real and magic.⁴⁴ Despite their different poetic and stylistic attitudes, these currents shared an understanding of reality, not as an ideological principle through which to retrieve an essential truth, but as something pertaining to the individual's inner self.⁴⁵

After its sharp decline during the Cultural Revolution, film production resumed in the late 1970s with a new generation of filmmakers, traditionally labelled the 'Fourth Generation' (*di si dai*). Directors like Xie Fei, Huang Shuqin, Wu Tianming, Zhang Nuanxin, Huang Jianzhong and Yang Yanjin presented reality through their personal viewpoints to emphasise the subjectivity of experience. The vicissitudes of non-heroic characters, the psychological burden of the Cultural Revolution, and previously-taboo topics, such as love, were painstakingly explored. To break with the tradition of socialist realism, filmmakers consciously referred to Western realist theories that, just like in the early 1920s, were advocated more for their symbolic value than for the aesthetics per se. In other words, by explicitly referring to the theorisations of André Bazin or the practices of Italian Neorealism, the purpose was not to accurately reproduce a certain stylistic proposition, but rather to discursively oppose the tenets of socialist realism by providing depoliticised narratives engaging with an individual dimension. For instance, the use of long takes in their works was primarily understood to be a reaction against the theatricality and manipulative editing of socialist realism. Similarly, the distinctive use of flashbacks, visual hallucinations, unusual camera angles and experimental editing were combined to achieve the same goal, connecting these films more with the modernist practice of expressionist cinema than with Bazin's realist aesthetics.⁴⁶ Concurrently, the early 1980s also welcomed a strong revival of melodrama. Strongly criticised by younger filmmakers, the most popular director in this respect was the veteran Xie Jin. Far from the purpose of modernist innovation, the 'Xie Jin model' was influenced by the traditional shadowplay and effectively appealed to popular taste by being rooted in more traditional melodramatic ground: heightened emotions, moralism, paternalism, and a social understanding embedded in parochial patriotism.⁴⁷

By the mid-1980s, the short cinematic experience of the Fourth Generation had given way to a younger group of filmmakers, loosely labelled the Fifth Generation (*di wu dai*). These included Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou and Huang Jianxin. For the first time in Chinese film history, Fifth Generation filmmakers understood cinema as an object of pure

⁴⁴ Root-seeking literature will be discussed further in chapter 4 with reference to magic(al) realist theories and their application in Chinese contemporary cinema.

⁴⁵ For reference studies on the PRC intellectual and cultural landscape of the 1980s, see Wang, *High Culture Fever*; Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*; Cherrington, *Deng's Generation*; Lin, *The Search for Modernity*; Tang, *Chinese Modern*.

⁴⁶ For analyses of Fourth Generation cinema, see Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*; Braester, *Witness against History*, 131-45; Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 230-35.

⁴⁷ Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," 315-16; Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reforms*, 50.

aesthetic analysis, and not as a derivative product of literature or a vehicle for ideology. Bazinian realism was still at the core of their cinematic discourse, but, once again, the extensive use of long takes, deep focus, location shooting, and non-professional actors did not necessarily point to documentary-like aesthetics. Instead, commentators often describe their style in terms of stylistic *pastiche*: on the one hand, Chinese traditional arts (especially painting) still exerted their influence in terms of colour choices and frame composition; on the other hand, Deng's reform favoured the transnational connection with modernist auteurs such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky, Kurosawa Akira and Ingmar Bergman, who in turn influenced the Fifth Generation's cinematic vision. To declare the formal autonomy of their cinematic proposition, this new wave of filmmakers detached their style from the contingencies of the extra-filmic world, disentangling from the material conditions of contemporary life, and rather setting their works mostly within allegorical rural landscapes and a-historical frames. Standing in an autonomous formal system governed by ambiguous symbols and allegories, Fifth Generation cinema thus comments on issues of national culture and identity through a metaphysical perspective and an overtly stylised cinematic vision. Configured as a space for subjective intervention, representation stands for reality itself in their works, and realism works a site of resistance against the hegemony of official discourses.⁴⁸

Introduced into China at the turn of the twentieth century, realism took part in the widespread cultural disorientation of the time. The often uncriticised adoption of foreign theories and the resulting different interpretations made realism a shifting concept from its first occurrence. As a theory of mimesis had never developed in China, discursive re-interpretations of the notion became an arena for competing ideologies, leading to a constant renegotiation of what 'reality' was intended to be. As Gong Haomin argues, "realism was less about faithful imitations of the real than about struggles over the discursive power to (re)present what is believed to be real": an extra-textual dimension to grasp via critical investigation, an ideological construction, or the aesthetic representation of an allegorical world.⁴⁹ Although every realist declination showed its distinct features, a notion of synthesis was shared by all of them. First of all, due to realism being a foreign import, the mediation of indigenous conventions had always intervened to adapt it to the specificities of the Chinese context. Accordingly, realisms in China have been structurally defined by the interplay of seemingly opposing terms, epitomised by the dichotomy observation and imagination, now turned into complementary drives. Anderson explains this point by

⁴⁸ For analyses of Fifth Generation cinema, see Chow, *Primitive Passions*; Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, 201-389; Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 235-40; Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reforms*, 39-69. For a collection of studies on the relation between Fifth Generation films and Chinese traditional arts, see Ehrlich and Desser, *Cinematic Landscapes*.

⁴⁹ Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 63.

evoking the traditional concepts of *qing* (emotion) and *li* (principle) that, unlike their Greek counterparts, passion and reason, do not necessarily assume diverging perspectives, but can actually coexist in the Chinese cultural discourse.⁵⁰ Intersecting its rhizomatic lines at different points and at different levels, the syncretic attitude of Chinese realisms testifies to the necessity of the author's subjective intervention to reach expressive effectiveness. Hence, Chinese realisms are not tantamount to a mechanical reproduction of the material dimension: reality is rather the mind of the author that reflects the world as it is, should be, and will be. Berry and Farquhar aptly acknowledge that, "realism [...] is a dominant mode of the Chinese cinema" exactly because "it is [...] active, inclusive, transformational, and continually contested".⁵¹ As a style of synthesis that constantly modifies its forms under the agency of multi-directional factors, realism in China's cultural history can thus be productively understood in terms of Marcos Novak's concept of the alien: an ever-changing object in the process of continuous allogenes, caught in a net of rhizomatic relations affecting it from multiple directions and combining to foster the production of new alien versions of the same self of reference. As the next chapters will further illustrate, this mechanism informed the evolutions of realism in the 1990s and 2000s as well. However, as argued in the previous chapter, the discussion should first painstakingly evaluate the post-national framework that prompted and defined these stylistic developments. Borrowing Novak's terminology, the following analysis will thus delineate our alien archipelago.

2. CHINESE POSTSOCIALISM: AN ALIEN ARCHIPELAGO

2.1 POST-NEW PERIOD AS POSTMODERNITY

4 June 1989 is the date that conventionally marks the end of the New Period. It coincides with the infamous event of Tian'anmen Square, a massacre referenced in Chinese sources with the milder term 'June 4 incident' (*liu si shijian*). The tanks marching over the square and the brutal repression of the democracy movement represent another watershed in recent Chinese history. The climate of relatively free expression and enlightenment that characterised the decade came to a violent halt and the dream of implementing the fifth modernisation – namely, democracy – appeared to vanish for good.⁵²

⁵⁰ Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 20.

⁵¹ Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 82.

⁵² The idea of democracy as the fifth modernisation comes from a wall poster signed by Chinese activist Wei Jingsheng and placed on the Democracy Wall in Beijing on 5 December 1978.

If the New Period is over, what historical phase is the PRC entering, and what are its characteristics? To answer this question, Zhang Yiwu coined the term 'Post-New Period' (*hou xin shiqi*) and described it with the following words:

What is the 'post-New Period'? To me, this concept represents the course of new cultural developments in mainland China since the 1990s. It is a general description of the state of contemporary Chinese culture in the global 'post-Cold War' cultural context. It refers to a period of new culture directed toward consumption, supported by mass communication, guided by the values of pragmatism, and constituted by a plurality of discourses. It has ended the authority of the discourse of enlightenment, and has entered into a dialogic relationship with the international current of 'postmodernity'. It is a concept of periodization as well as a code of cultural interpretation. The appearance of this concept and the debates about it indicate the enormous, obvious cultural differences between the 1990s and the 'New Period.'⁵³

By pointing out new trends of consumerism in Chinese society and the advent of globalised mass media communications, Zhang Yiwu links the Post-New Period to the "international current of postmodernity". In its originary formulation, as a periodising concept, postmodernity (*houxiandai*) defines the historical frame of Western capitalist societies living under the economic and socio-cultural condition of post-industrialism. However, Zhang does not simply confine his argument to a temporal definition, but more extensively intends postmodernity to be "a code of cultural interpretation" for the whole era. What Zhang advocates is thus postmodernism (*houxiandaizhuyi*), a term that, in a general context, bears various definitions: a cultural phenomenon affecting highly developed capitalist countries; a kind of worldview that no longer believes in an ideal of totality, but rather of fragmentation, plurality and decentralisation; a cultural and critical strategy fighting against any form of discursive hegemonism; a philosophical and artistic trend preoccupied with the crisis of representation and metanarratives. In Zhang's conceptualisation, postmodernism is not only conceived as the reading method to decode the contemporary age, but aims to be identified as

⁵³ Zhang, *Cong xiandaixing dao houxiandaixing*, 74. Translation in Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 207. Regarding the transition from the New to the Post-New Period, the choice of 1989 as the watershed year is apparently a politically-tainted one, although obviously rooted in concrete facts. In this respect, Chinese scholar Chen Xuguang reminds us that this shift should not be seen as something that happened suddenly in 1989, but more as a fluid process that started in the second half of the 1980s and unfolded throughout the 1990s, if not even up until the twenty-first century. To substantiate his argument, Chen analyses a number of changing trends in several cultural fields, including poetry (from Misty Poetry to Post-Misty Poetry and commercial poetry), prose (from experimental novelists to 'new realism'), visual arts (from avant-garde and conceptual art to Fang Lijun's idiotic characters), and music (from Cui Jian to karaoke). Chen, *Yingxiang dangdai Zhongguo*, 44-47.

the cultural dominant logic of the Post-New Period. By showing such an understanding, the scholar ideally follows Fredric Jameson's line of thought for which:

the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available, and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant logic of late capitalism [has to be stressed greatly]: the two approaches in fact generate two very different ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon as a whole, on the one hand moral judgements (about which it is indifferent whether they are positive or negative), and on the other a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History.⁵⁴

This formulation apparently entails a few problematic aspects, which are all the Western-related features such as 'post-industrialism' and 'late capitalism'. Although the increasing role of globalisation, consumerism and mass communication in contemporary China is an undisputable matter, the reception of the notion of postmodernism in the PRC has been decidedly controversial. As Yang Xiaobing states, "postmodernism has been declared either impossible or unquestionable, depending on different assessments of the nature of Chinese society measured by the degree of development of its civilization or its production-distribution mode".⁵⁵ Ostensibly Jameson's view of postmodernism as the "cultural dominant logic of late capitalism" and, more generally, as an understanding of postmodernity as a post-industrial condition cannot be coherently applied to the Chinese case: the PRC has been and nominally still is a socialist country, the capitalist experiments are too recent an experience to be seen in their 'late' stage, the socio-cultural condition of post-industrialism has largely not yet been accomplished, and, more generally, modernity in its traditional Western conceptualisation has not been fulfilled either. From these standpoints, many intellectuals have resisted the very idea of postmodernism applied to China. For instance, Wang Ning, in his studies on contemporary Chinese literature, ends up understating the contribution of postmodernism as he still considers China as a Third World, socio-economically underdeveloped country. By applying Darwinian logic of development that sees postmodernism as necessarily developing from modernism, Wang Ning declares the impossibility of the former cultural code as the latter has not yet fully developed in China. Hence the scholar finally concludes that postmodernism can only exist in the West, due to specific mechanisms of cultural evolution that cannot be found in China's cultural history.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 85.

⁵⁵ Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern*, 233.

⁵⁶ Wang, "The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity," 38; and "Constructing Postmodernism," 58-59.

Conversely, other intellectuals elude these objections and make use of postmodernism as a critical concept to describe China's current condition. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, and even more after the 1989 crisis, economic development and the restless strive to increase the national GDP (someone even coined the term *jidipizhuyi*, 'GDP-ism', to account for this economic frenzy)⁵⁷ took the place of the outdated discourse of revolution to legitimise the rule of the CCP over the nation.⁵⁸ During the 1990s, and especially after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 'trip to the South' (*nanxun*), the PRC increasingly became an active and aggressive agent on the global economic scene, until earning its controversial and longed-for entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on 11 December 2001. The PRC's entry into the WTO is an event of great symbolic and material relevance in contemporary Chinese history as it ratifies China's anchoring to the capitalist world market after two decades of post-Mao reforms. According to some scholars, it might even inaugurate a new historical phase that Zhang Jingping tentatively names the Post-Policy Period (*hou zhengce shidai*).⁵⁹ Ideally countering Wang Ning's verdict, Zhang Yiwu argues that postmodernism under these circumstances does not remain confined to the First and Second Worlds, but can be adopted in Third World cultures too, as a consequence of the new globalised condition and the agency of global mass communication.⁶⁰ Similarly, Sheldon Lu argues that the "cultural, economic, and intellectual developments in China during the 1990s were not unrelated to transformations in the global cultural economy. Thus, it seems imperative to situate these developments in this larger context". The 'larger context' mentioned by Lu is that of global capitalism, a term that "signifies the emergence of an age of transnational production, distribution and consumption, with the transnational corporation as the locus of the economic activity, and change in the function of the nation-state from a scene of domestic conflict to manager of a global economy".⁶¹ In light of this, China appears as a post-national subject developing in connection to a transnational, global course of history. Accordingly, the

⁵⁷ See Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 18.

⁵⁸ Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu advocate a 'farewell to revolution' to describe what they interpret as the gradual process of social development in contemporary China. In their analysis, the PRC is going through four main ascending phases of development: economic growth, individual freedom, social justice, and finally political democracy (Cf. Li and Liu, *Gaobie geming*). Many commentators criticise such a step-by-step analysis as an idealist understanding that proves outdated under the new circumstances. Wang Hui, for instance, defines this process as a 'myth of transition', which is put into use to conceal the political conservatism and passivity of its proponents (Wang, *China's New Order*, 43; see also Wang, "Introduction," 17; and Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 23-24). Similarly, Gan Yang theorises a three-phase project of development starting with the import of science and technology from the West, then moving to democratisation and institutional reforms, and finally reaching its ultimate goal in the modernisation of culture (Gan, "Bashi niandai wenhua taolun de ji ge wenti"). However, this proposition, that prioritises culture over the rest, can also be interpreted as the display of a certain cultural idealism still anchored to the New Period. For critiques of Gan's propositions see He, "1980 niandai 'wenhua re' de zhishi puxi yu yishi xingtai"; and Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 146n45.

⁵⁹ Cited in Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 20.

⁶⁰ Zhang, "Lixiangzhuyi de zhongjie," 119.

⁶¹ Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, 12.

requirements of 'late capitalism' and 'post-industrialism' expected by the traditional formula are replaced by the association with global capitalism to justify the critical use of postmodernism.

However, although already denoting a specifically Chinese way to postmodernism, this argument does not fully justify the adoption of the postmodern paradigm. Hence we should discuss in more detail the post-national proposition delineated in the previous chapter, which recognises the fading relevance of national borders within the globalised world order, while simultaneously stressing the persisting relevance of local determination. In other words, although critical resistance to the notion of postmodernism in China mostly originates from a discursive understanding of the PRC as a nation-state, it is becoming increasingly problematic to assume the nation-form as the main unit of analysis. Disrupting drives both from without (globalisation) and within (transnational localisation) the political borders of the state combine to undermine the assumption of an unified Chinese national identity. As John Fiske argues, "globalization always provokes localization, and one result of these forces has been the erosion of that middle level of organization, the nation-state, and consequently, of a national culture".⁶² This 'erosion' thus generates a complementary tension as the world market, on the one hand, promotes its universal claims while, on the other hand, at a local level, it makes the Chinese people "encounter a world of difference, unevenness, inequality, and hierarchy" that are a "constant reminder of location, boundary, and community".⁶³ To put it differently, concurrent with their integration into the globalised world, the "Chinese must also be experiencing what Ernest Gellner calls the 'fatalistic' sense of belonging [...], namely, an enhanced communal identity".⁶⁴ To effectively account for Chinese postmodernism, we should therefore take into account this dual perspective that simultaneously signals integration in and difference from the global order.

2.2 FROM FRAGMENTATION TO PLURALISATION

By evaluating the diverging stances towards postmodernism and its controversial reception in China, Yang Xiaobing perceptively notes that in either case "the Marxist theorem that 'the economic base determines the superstructure' remains the potential ideology in the discussion of postmodernism".⁶⁵ However, according to the scholar, postmodernism cannot be tested exclusively against economic factors, since:

⁶² Fiske, "Global, National, Local?" 57.

⁶³ Dirlik and Zhang, "Introduction," 7.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 7. See Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 61-62.

⁶⁵ Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern*, 234.

commercialism and cultural massification have prevailed in China under the sway of, or even in complicity with, its overshadowing political authoritarianism [...] If Jameson's Western postmodernism is a corollary of (what he calls) late capitalist civilization, then Chinese postmodernism has to do with the cultural psychology provoked by the particular political condition as the very basis of sociocultural superstructure. Accordingly, it is inevitable for us to focus the study of Chinese postmodernism on political-cultural mentality rather than material civilization.⁶⁶

Following Yang's suggestion, we are invited to focus on the cultural discourse to better appreciate postmodernism in the Chinese context. If we are to fix an ideal date for the introduction of the term into Chinese intellectual and cultural spheres, 1985 might then represent the most appropriate choice. In that year, Fredric Jameson first imported the concept into China by delivering a lecture on the topic at Beijing University.⁶⁷ However postmodernism was not hailed with particular ardour in the PRC at first as most of the cultural producers were engaged in reviving modernism (*xiandai zhuyi*) at that time. Nonetheless, the literary field was probably the most receptive and, as Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong argue, "postmodernism first emerged [in China] not as a theoretical challenge (as the cliché goes) but as an aesthetic expectation".⁶⁸ The publication of the first Chinese translation of John Barth's "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction" in *Waiguo wenxue baogao* (Report on Foreign Literature) dates back to the 1980s and paved the way for other literary journals (especially those specialising in foreign literature) to translate and publish works by postmodernist writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Italo Calvino. Soon afterwards, academic contributions by scholars working on postmodernity and postmodernism such as Jean-François Lyotard, Douwe Fokkema, Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson appeared in Chinese academic journals too.⁶⁹ Postmodernism was first manifested in small elitist groups including avant-garde and experimental artists and writers, and only later in the 1990s expanded its significance to the field of popular and mass culture. It was exactly at this point, when the PRC started integrating into global capitalism and culture underwent a substantial process of commercialisation, that the reception of postmodernism intensified and the concept was discussed actively in intellectual circles. A large part of the intellectual community experienced this phenomenon with traumatic

⁶⁶ Ibid., 235.

⁶⁷ Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, 34.

⁶⁸ Dirlik and Zhang, "Introduction," 9.

⁶⁹ Wang, "The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity," 26.

discomfort: in a cultural history that, for centuries, had placed intellectuals at the top of the social pyramid (up until the enlightened idealism of the 1980s), the marginal position to which they were relegated in the Post-New Period stood out as an unprecedented and unpleasant novelty.

As the gap between elite culture (*jingying wenhua*) and popular culture (*dazhong wenhua*) grew broader, the Chinese intellectual panorama underwent a fundamental fragmentation. Several types of cultural and critical discourse coexist in Post-New Period China and, according to Sheldon Lu, this already “exemplif[ies] the loss of intellectual orientation among Chinese cultural workers”.⁷⁰ One major trend is identified by the wide range of ‘post-isms’ (*houxue*), a general term that indicates Western-imported post-theories such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and of course postmodernism. The intellectuals who identify themselves within this group (also ironically named *houxue dashi*, ‘post-masters’, *hou zhishifenzi*, ‘post-intellectuals’, or *hou jingying*, ‘post-elite’)⁷¹ apply the Western post-ist theories to place China within the current global(ised) context and historicise the country’s position within the transnational network of markets and capital. To the post-ist intellectual, underestimating phenomena such as the rise of popular culture and the ubiquitous presence of the mass media, and accounting for the PRC as an isolated historical subject unaffected by global changes, means producing just another essentialising discourse on China. In a contemporary world characterised by fragmentation and decentralisation, the humanist quest for a reconstructed, unified subject, which was the objective of New Period intellectuals, is then finally dismissed as the “last myth”.⁷²

Another prominent intellectual discourse is the debate on the so-called Asian modernity. The construction of an ‘alternative modernity’ that can conciliate diverging drives such as ‘Asianness’/Chineseness and globalisation within one single critical formula stands at the core of its vision. It primarily aims to discard Max Weber’s well-known argument that sees Confucianism (and other forms of Asian ethics) as an impediment to the development of capitalism.⁷³ Intellectuals thus reflect on the cultural reasons that allow Asian countries to play so well in the global market and the extent to which specific Asian values and the persistence of the Confucian tradition have contributed to this success. It is an anti-hegemonic and decentralising discourse that discards the understanding of modernity and capital as Western prerogatives by propelling a revival of Confucianism and attempting to rewrite the logic of capitalist development. In other words, Asian societies are now seen as active agents in

⁷⁰ Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, 41. For a discussion of the several intellectual discourses in Post-New Period China, see *ibid.*, 38-43.

⁷¹ Zhao, “‘Houxue’ yu Zhongguo xin baoshouzhuyi,” 4.

⁷² Zhang, “Renwen jingshen,” 137-41.

⁷³ See Weber, *The Religion of China*.

contemporary world history with their traditional values working as correctives to the unilateral enlightenment discourse emanating from the West.⁷⁴

A different intellectual discourse is the debate on the ‘humanistic spirit’ (*renwen jingshen*). Firmly opposing the post-ist arguments and directly following the modernist trend of the New Period, it includes intellectuals adhering to the philosophical tradition of Chinese humanities. Looking for a cultural strategy that can reinstate the traditional humanistic studies at the core of a renewed project of enlightenment, its major concern is the definition of a universal and transcendent humanistic spirit that can transhistorically inform China. In a dispute against postmodernism and the other post-isms, its main target of critical opposition is the supposedly nihilist character of Western-imported theories.⁷⁵ Along the same lines, the so-called Chinese national studies (*guoxue*) might be seen as an extremisation of the humanistic spirit debate. Resolutely against post-ism and the commercialisation of the Chinese cultural life, this group suggests a radical withdrawal into academia to carry out studies on traditional Chinese humanities.⁷⁶ In the field of political philosophy, another important distinction is between the New Left (*xin zuopai*) and the Liberals. New Leftists fight against social inequality and any form of unevenness, still believing in the possibility of collective manoeuvres to achieve justice for the marginalised masses. Instead, the Liberals aim to build a new civil society by implementing differentiating practices that can release the power of individuals from the constraining cage of an old and ineffective socio-economic system.⁷⁷

Within this discussion, a general divide can be drawn between Chinese intellectuals living and working in the PRC, and Chinese intellectuals of the diaspora, who are living and working abroad. While the former group (including Zhang Yiwu, for instance) appears to be more willing to embrace the new opportunities for critical enquiry offered by post-ist theories, the latter group seems instead to resist the postmodernist position in favour of a return to a modernist humanist practice that can continue the discourse of enlightenment left unfinished in the New Period. Notable examples of scholars who have adopted this attitude are Zhao Yiheng (also known as Henry Zhao, working in London in the 1990s) and Xu Ben (working in California) who criticise post-ism for being just another form of conservatism that weakens the project of modernity and its ideals of democracy, freedom of expression and human rights so passionately pursued during the 1980s.⁷⁸ However, as Sheldon Lu puts it, “the view that discourse about

⁷⁴ For an overview of the topic, see Dirlik, “Confucius in the Borderlands.” See also Liu, *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China*; and “Is There an Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization?”

⁷⁵ See Wang, *Houxiandaizhuyi wenhua yanjiu*, 45.

⁷⁶ A general presentation of this particular intellectual discourse can be found in Chen, “Jiushi niandai bulü weijian de ‘guoxue yanjiu’”.

⁷⁷ Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 7.

⁷⁸ See Zhao, “‘Houxue’ yu Zhongguo xin baoshouzhuyi” and “Moxuyou xiansheng yu tamen de watiao”; Xu, “Di san shijie piping zai dangjin Zhongguo de chujing”.

Chinese postmodernism is purely conservative and reactionary forgets the other half of the story: namely, the decentering, democratizing effects unleashed by postmodern forces".⁷⁹ To recognise the democratising potential of postmodernism means to overcome a negative attitude towards the bloom of popular culture, mass communication, new technologies, and the flow of transnational capital necessarily seen as socio-cultural standardisation. Even more significantly, it means to acknowledge the postmodernist attitude towards hybridity: following Ann Kaplan's positive argument, postmodernism can be productively understood as a framework allowing the concurrent existence of a multitude of contesting voices and viewpoints.⁸⁰ In fact, this brief overview of the several intellectual debates coexisting in contemporary China certifies the "plurality of discourses" that Zhang Yiwu mentions in his definition of the Post-New Period. The theoretical and qualitative shift I am suggesting here is thus one from a condition that is negatively assessed in terms of 'fragmentation' to a more positive evaluation in terms of constructive 'pluralisation'. The idea of 'fragmentation' implies the disintegration of a supposedly unified meaning into a number of scattered pieces that are unable to express a singular meaning of their own. Thinking in terms of 'pluralisation' instead requires a creative effort towards the multiplication of significance, a positive attempt not to reconstruct a monolithic unified meaning, but to present a multifaceted prism of competing yet complementary options. Following this path, one can resist a unilateral vision of contemporary China and is encouraged to address its historical and socio-cultural condition as a multi-layered and self-contradictory terrain of analysis. However, contradiction should not be seen as a destabilising condition, something to be afraid of or automatically inconsistent. On the contrary, contradiction signals a chaotic yet fruitful index of complexity, producing multiple meanings and multi-directional strategies to approach the reality of contemporary China.

2.3 UNFINISHED POSTSOCIALISM

The understanding of postmodernity in terms of pluralisation imposes a distinctive reading of contemporary China. But what are the historical processes that have contributed to defining it? How does it describe the contemporary era and how does it shape a specifically Chinese version of postmodernism? To answer these questions, the discussion should focus on what teleologically preceded postmodernity, namely (Chinese) modernity. In this respect, Zhang Yiwu argues that "reflecting on and critiquing 'modernity' are the basic tasks of contemporary

⁷⁹ Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, 17.

⁸⁰ Kaplan, *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, 1-9.

culture”.⁸¹ On the same lines, Zhang Xudong adds that “a meaningful notion of Chinese postmodernism must be in-itself and for-itself a historical coming to terms with Chinese modernity as an admittedly unfinished project but one whose legitimacy, validity, and universal claims have already, for better or worse, come under fire”.⁸²

Once again, moving from Zhang Yiwu’s formulations proves interesting. In his extensive *j’accuse* against modernity, the Chinese scholar criticises the whole project of enlightenment, which he sees as starting as early as the Opium Wars and then continuing through the May Fourth up to the New Period. Modernity to him represents “a set of knowledge/power discourses centred on Western Enlightenment values” which “gave rise to a body of ‘knowledge’ about China / the West, with the purpose of deciding China’s place in the world by the application of this ‘knowledge’”.⁸³ In other words, Zhang interprets modernity in China as a manifestation of Western colonialism or, more precisely, a process of self-colonisation in which Chinese intellectuals “internalised the point of view of the Western subject”. According to the scholar, “this process of othering one’s own culture [became] the most important mark of modernity in China”.⁸⁴ Zhang goes to argue that, with the advent of the Post-New Period, China has experienced a historical twist that favours de-colonising and de-centring drives. Caught in an overall process of relentless development, China has turned into a subject exceeding all discursive and interpretative schema, both of Western and indigenous origins. To put it differently, “China seems to have become an uncontrollable Other” that must stay ‘incomprehensible’ to resist foreign hegemony.⁸⁵ To accomplish this anti-hegemonic goal, China should insist on its cultural specificities, not in the sense of retreating into another essentialising discourse of Chineseness, but rather by acknowledging the shifting and unstable nature of its contemporary composition.

When addressing modernity in the Chinese context, it would be misleading to understand it in the singular form. Referring to a plural concept of ‘modernities’, instead, would prove more accurate. This is not intended as a generic poststructuralist act of pluralisation, but rather as the acknowledgement that there is not just one single project of modernity in China’s cultural history. On the contrary, several different discourses have gathered momentum

⁸¹ Zhang, “‘Xiandaixing’ de zhongjie,” 108. Translation in Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse*, 137.

⁸² Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 141-42.

⁸³ Zhang, “‘Xiandaixing’ de zhongjie,” 105. Translation in Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse*, 136. Reacting against Zhang Yiwu’s polemical prose, Haun Saussy notes that “persuaded that the observations or analysis of foreigners [...] are ‘regulated by Western cultural hegemony’ [...] he [Zhang] refuses to grant them the status of knowledge and marks this by surrounding the words ‘knowledge’ and ‘China’ with quotation marks [...] This is a wonderful application of postmodern theory – to write off other people’s claims to knowledge as social constructions and leave one’s own unquestioned!” Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse*, 134.

⁸⁴ Zhang, “‘Xiandaixing’ de zhongjie,” 106. Translation in Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse*, 133.

⁸⁵ Zhang, “Chanshi ‘Zhongguo’ de jiaolü,” 128. Translation in Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse*, 134.

throughout the twentieth century: the May Fourth Movement, the Communist Revolution and Maoism, and the enlightenment project of the New Period. Each modernity project displayed its specific worldview, concurrently distancing itself from and dialogically engaging with the previous forms. Despite their marked differences, they all share a fundamental feature: they were all left unfinished – the iconoclastic, Western-oriented utilitarianism of May Fourth gradually slackened with the rise of the Communist Revolution that in turn, on the death of Mao Zedong, was superseded by the enlightened cultural critique of the New Period, which was then abruptly frustrated in the bloodshed of Tian'anmen. Gregory Jusdanis contends that “belated modernization, especially in non-Western societies, necessarily remains ‘incomplete’ not because it deviates from the supposed correct path but because it cannot culminate in a faithful duplication of Western prototypes”. Accordingly “the project of becoming modern [...] differs from place to place. That is why it is possible to speak of many modernities”.⁸⁶ On the same lines, Sheldon Lu argues that “the construction of a Chinese modernity has been inescapably the construction of an alternative and hybrid modernity since the beginning of modern Chinese history”.⁸⁷ Chinese modernities thus recoil from the unilinear evolutionary path described by the conventional Western notion, and develop instead through multiple temporalities and cultural detours. Hence, given their value of incompleteness, Chinese modernities project their lingering influence onto their future articulations.⁸⁸ In other words, in the Post-New Period, “Chinese modernity [...] does not disappear into but becomes intertwined with postmodernity”.⁸⁹ Chinese postmodernity thus distinctively signals a condition in which “multiple temporalities [are] superimposed on one another; [that is] the pre-modern, the modern, and the post-modern coexist in the same place and at the same moment”.⁹⁰ Dirlik and Zhang more specifically describe “a situation of spatial fracturing and temporal desynchronization” in which a variety of spatial and temporal concerns combine to define China as actually postmodern: the unevenness of regional development, the institution of special economic zones, the discourse of Chinese diaspora, the ambiguities between socialism and capitalism, modernism and postmodernism.⁹¹ By applying Jusdanis’ understanding of non-Western modernities to this specific formulation of

⁸⁶ Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture*, xiii.

⁸⁷ Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, 49.

⁸⁸ For instance, Ci Jiwei understands the material indulgence of the New Period as a twisted extension of Maoist utopianism since they are both rooted in hedonistic ideals projected towards a deferred utopian future (Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*. For a discussion of Ci’s argument, see also Latham, “Rethinking Chinese Consumption,” 221). Similarly, other scholars have discussed the ‘high culture fever’ of the 1980s as the counterpart of Maoist cultural fanaticism since they both relied on a pronounced cultural optimism that, in the former case, “had more to do with the residual totalitarianism of the socialist state than with the internal dynamism of Chinese society”. (Zhang, “Intellectual Politics in Post-Tiananmen China,” 3).

⁸⁹ Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 13.

⁹⁰ Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, 13.

⁹¹ Dirlik and Zhang, “Introduction,” 3.

Chinese postmodernity, the latter can also be further appreciated as “a renewed effort to rethink China’s difference from the West”.⁹² The distinction between the Chinese postmodern and its Western original have been discussed above, and the conclusion has been reached that the classic Jamesonian interpretation of postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism” or “what you have when the modernization process is complete” is hardly applicable to the Chinese case.⁹³ Accordingly, in a condition in which modernity, in all its guises and definitions, has not yet been accomplished, and in which its projects did not coincide historically with capitalism, but rather with socialism, postmodernity cannot be just “what comes after the modern, but rather what comes after particular manifestations of the modern in China’s historical circumstances, that the postmodern is also the postrevolutionary and the postsocialist”.⁹⁴

The term ‘postsocialism’ with regard to China was first suggested by Arif Dirlik in his 1989 anthology *Marxism and the Chinese Experience: Issues in Contemporary Chinese Socialism*. Dirlik defines the term with reference to Jean-François Lyotard’s understanding of postmodernism: if, to the French thinker, postmodernism denotes incredulity towards metanarratives, thus postsocialism indicates disbelief towards socialism, being it a specific grand narrative of Chinese modernity.⁹⁵ In Dirlik’s own words, postsocialism is the historical condition in which “socialism has lost its coherence as a metatheory of politics because of the attenuation of the socialist vision in its historical unfolding”.⁹⁶ China as a postsocialist society is indeed disengaging from its revolutionary past; however many of its current contradictions take form in the “anomalous situation of a state that still claims socialism to legitimize itself, but must nevertheless demonstrate its legitimacy by being more successful at capitalism than capitalist societies”.⁹⁷ Contemporary China thus creates a distinctive, if not unique, model of postmodernity by configuring postsocialism as a peculiar link between the country’s past and its present/future: “it feels nostalgia for the revolutionary past even as it enters the doors of the supermarket of capitalism”.⁹⁸ Following Yang Xiaobing’s inspiring suggestion, postsocialism actuates what in Freudian psychoanalysis is known as *Nachträglichkeit*, ‘afterwardness’, a

⁹² Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, 49.

⁹³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

⁹⁴ Dirlik and Zhang, “Introduction,” 4. The two scholars also notice that Chinese historians use two different terms to denote the concept of ‘modern’: *jindai* (recent) refers to the period ranging from 1839 (First Opium War) to 1919 (May Fourth Movement), and *xiandai* (contemporary) refers to the period from 1919 onwards. More specifically, *xiandai* identifies the period starting with the foundation of the CCP in 1921, and thus coincides with the whole era of the Communist Revolution. Accordingly, the term *houxiandai* (postmodernity) also bears a pronounced sense of post-revolutionary/post-socialist. *Ibid.*, 9-10n9.

⁹⁵ See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

⁹⁶ Dirlik, “Postsocialism?” 364.

⁹⁷ Dirlik and Zhang, “Introduction,” 8.

⁹⁸ Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 210.

deferred action that reactivates a trauma linked to an experience of historical violence. In the same way, postsocialism can be understood as the re-enactment of the traumatic psychic burden of socialism that is still wielding its influence on the present.⁹⁹ The prefix 'post-' in the word 'postsocialism' therefore bears a special value as it simultaneously entails discontinuity (the affirmation of new circumstances) and continuity (the remnants or persistence of preceding conditions). It therefore does not identify a strict chronological connotation, nor "a diachronic transcendence of the modern but a synchronic evocation and expulsion of its repression," through which postsocialism shows "a temporal force of deferral and a spatial force of deviation within the not completely forgotten, but immemorial, desire and repression of the modern".¹⁰⁰ Hence the prefix 'post-' does not suggest a more advanced (or backward) form of socio-economic and political-cultural development, but rather a distinctive attempt to deal with a puzzling intersection of modes of production, social systems and cultural forms. It does not suggest "a sense that something is over, but that something is finally ready to begin along with the breaking of all kinds of rigid epistemological paradigms, aesthetic canons, historical periodizations, geographical hierarchies, and institutional reifications".¹⁰¹

Broadly speaking, two opposite reactions have arisen in the scholarly community with regard to the notion of postsocialism: a negative appraisal and a positive interpretation. The former stance is advocated, for instance, by Paul Pickowicz, for whom postsocialism identifies "an alienated [...] mode of thought and behaviour" concurrently characterised by "the vestiges of late imperial culture, the remnants of the modern and bourgeois culture of the republican era, the residue of traditional socialist culture, and elements of both modernism and postmodernism".¹⁰² Whilst acknowledging the complexity of postsocialism and its overlapping temporal features, Pickowicz denotes the notion with a dystopian, almost dreadful quality. Conversely, Dirlik shows a more positive consideration towards the many possibilities that the hybrid postsocialist solution offers. According to the scholar, "postsocialism, rather than signaling the end of socialism, offers the possibility in the midst of a crisis in socialism to rethink socialism in new, more creative ways".¹⁰³ Zhang Xudong ideally follows this proposition and understands postsocialism as "an intellectual liberation from the teleological historical

⁹⁹ Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern*, 231. Yang applies the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* to his theorisation of the 'Chinese postmodern'. However it is possible to extend its relevance to our discussion of postsocialism as well.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 245.

¹⁰¹ See Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 136, 10-12.

¹⁰² Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism," 62, 60. In addition to this, Pickowicz specifies that "it would be wrong [...] to suggest that the phenomenon of postsocialism appeared only after the death of Mao or that it is simply a cultural by-product of the reform decade [...]. The massive disillusionment [...] began midway through the Cultural Revolution (and perhaps earlier in the countryside)." (62)

¹⁰³ Dirlik, "Postsocialism?" 380.

determinism which, in the name of a rivalry between socialism and capitalism, tends to imprison the mind in a rigid and dogmatic notion of modernity".¹⁰⁴ Accordingly postsocialism is seen as "a conceptual proposal to stay and live in contradiction and chaos in a mixed economy and its overlapping political and cultural (dis)order".¹⁰⁵

An understanding of postsocialism highlighting the opportunities for critical renewal amidst the transformations of the incomplete projects of modernity, delineates a fertile ground for the present research, a terrain of enquiry in which the intersection of rhizomatic, transvergent lines appears especially appropriate. As Zhang Yiwu states, we should thus "use [...] theory to critique theory, using contemporary Chinese conditions to reflect on theory, and using theory to match contemporary Chinese conditions, so as to produce a two-sided hermeneutic and gain a new cultural imagination and creativity".¹⁰⁶ What is at stake in the discourse of Chinese postsocialism is in fact "an ambivalent, uneasy relationship between universality and difference, between the unfolding of modernity/postmodernity as a universal process in world history and the specific, local condition of China".¹⁰⁷ Here lies the 'elective affinity' connecting postmodernism and postsocialism: whereas postmodernism links China to a global historical horizon, postsocialism emphasises the national historical legacy. As Zhang Xudong puts it, Chinese postmodernism is "the cultural logic of a postsocialist society" or, as Sheldon Lu formulates, not without a touch of irony, "postsocialism is postmodernity with Chinese characteristics".¹⁰⁸ The relation between these notions is made discursively consistent by means of "the social, political and cultural vocabulary" of postsocialism, "through which the more general or standard grammar of postmodern experience [...] can be imagined, confronted, and assimilated".¹⁰⁹ Hence, typical markers of postmodernity such as decentralisation, transnational mobility, consumerism and an inclination towards multiplicity, pluralism, mutation, and regeneration, and simultaneously against centres, origins and hierarchies, can also be understood as internal dynamics of postsocialist China. Postsocialism can thus be properly understood as the specific Chinese variant of the broader discourse of postmodernism. As such, it should be evaluated from the unique historical-cultural perspective of China and not by pedantically applying a set of norms borrowed from Western postmodern artists and theoreticians. As Wang Ning maintains, "postmodernism is no longer a monolithic phenomenon but rather has generated different forms both in the West and in the East. So to observe

¹⁰⁴ Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Zhang, "Chanshi 'Zhongguo' de jiaolü," 134-35. Translation in Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse*, 135.

¹⁰⁷ Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, 49.

¹⁰⁸ Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 137; Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 208. See also Lu, "Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China," 121, 125. The term 'elective affinity' is suggested by Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 144.

¹⁰⁹ Dirlik and Zhang, "Introduction," 8.

postmodernism [...] it is necessary to construct this concept at different levels in a pluralistic way".¹¹⁰ Pushing this argument a little further, by exploiting the creative potential discussed above, the conceptual power of Chinese postsocialism should thus be seen as "a theoretical amendment to the general discourse on postmodernity,"¹¹¹ and, even more importantly, as "a generator of postmodernity" itself.¹¹²

However, such a formulation of postsocialism is not endorsed by all commentators. A different evaluation, for instance, is offered by Jason McGrath in his 2008 volume *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Resisting both the assumptions of postmodernism and 'alternative modernity', McGrath argues instead for the notion of 'postsocialist modernity'. This conceptualisation delineates, on the one hand, the ways in which contemporary China affects the development of Western countries and global capitalism today; on the other hand, it describes the country's internal disintegration and the loss of a master ideological signifier except for the powerful forces of the market. McGrath advocates modernity rather than postmodernity, as the most appropriate theoretical framework for critical analysis, as he understands the modern ideal of progress to still be the main driving force of Chinese society. However, I contend that this approach can only account for one of the overlapping temporal threads constituting the multi-layered net of contemporary China. By following this proposition, for instance, the lingering influence of China's non-capitalist (pre-)modernity or the socialist legacy remains largely underestimated.¹¹³

Gong Haomin's 2012 *Uneven Modernity: Literature, Film, and Intellectual Discourse in Postsocialist China* articulates these issues more convincingly. Gong formulates a theory of unevenness to describe the condition of contemporary Chinese culture, understanding the concept not descriptively as an accidental side-effect of Chinese modernity, but rather as one of its intrinsic and distinctive features. As Gong explains, although the final goal of postsocialist China is common prosperity and the formation of a harmonious society (*hexie shehui*), the Chinese government has purposely implemented a number of uneven practices to achieve its objectives.¹¹⁴ From the country's economic hybridity to its geographical differentiations, the consequences of this unevenness significantly affect Chinese society and the overall project of national development: the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the uncontrolled

¹¹⁰ Wang, "The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity," 20-21.

¹¹¹ Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 11.

¹¹² Dirlik and Zhang, "Introduction," 18.

¹¹³ See McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 1-24 and 203-26.

¹¹⁴ The concept of a 'harmonious society' was introduced in 2002 by the President of the PRC Hu Jintao to define the ultimate goal of his national policies. Other nationalist slogans adopted under the chairmanship of Hu include 'peaceful rise' (*heping jieqi*), used to define the increasing prominence of China in the world order, and 'great renaissance of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing*), which indicates the recovery of a status of grandeur that has been widely perceived as lost for a long time. See Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 210.

expansion of the cities at the expense of the countryside, environmental destruction and the exploitation of natural resources, and the alienation of the Chinese citizens who wonder whether the final purpose of this development is their well-being or just to show-off of statistical figures. By placing unevenness at the core of China's process of development, Gong understands it as a structural force that is actively shaping the country. Hence, unevenness is theorised as the contradictory yet necessary condition to implement China's plans for progress. The fundamental contradiction of unevenness is that it is, at the same time, the major source of problems in China today, as well as its main factor of strength, as the radical application of its practices has strongly contributed to the country's global success.¹¹⁵ Therefore, Gong describes the unevenness as "a pathological necessity"¹¹⁶:

Dialectically contemplated [...] it should be taken as a *necessary impossibility* – a self-contradictory dynamism that exhibits its logic in the very process of its unfolding. By the term "impossibility," I mean that unevenness in China is a self-cancelling process, precisely because it is drafted as an expedient practice with the aim of accomplishing a harmonious evenness. However, at the same time this expedient practice is *necessary* not simply because, as expected, it helps expedite the process of coming to the final end, but, contrarily, in *not* yet reaching the end, it puts itself forward and offers, within the process of signification itself, much prominence and visibility.¹¹⁷

Zhang Xudong's insight on the ephemeral nature of Chinese modernity provides a useful corollary to such a formulation. To him, "the Chinese modern is always on the lookout for something that comes after the modern, or rather, for an even yet more plural world in which one feels both modern and at home".¹¹⁸ Following both Gong's and Zhang's arguments, modernity in China is thus something that has to be simultaneously new by definition and intimately connected to the country's past. There is no contradiction between these two seemingly diverging stances, but in order to achieve this condition, Chinese modernity must ultimately tend towards incompleteness. As modernity remains incomplete under the power of unevenness and postsocialism is contestedly defined by a multi-temporal combination of modernit(ies), postsocialism too can be envisioned as an unfinished proposition, even more so due to its ongoing status. Unfinished postsocialism simultaneously displays its destabilising agency on the present and projects itself towards the future, that is, towards an ideal point of

¹¹⁵ For an extensive introduction to the theory of unevenness and its application to the Chinese case, see Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 1-31.

¹¹⁶ Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 18.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5. Original emphasis.

¹¹⁸ Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 169.

closure which structurally will never be reached – it stretches in a constant tension towards consistency, but this desire is systematically frustrated. Devoid of any final point or master discourse that could coherently provide an exhaustive narration, postsocialism keeps on producing images of signification, and projects them onto the present to make sense of it. In other words, postsocialism multiplies and pluralises meanings in an attempt to decode a seemingly unreadable reality. The unfolding of this process of signification, which creates a variety of contrasting meanings (the pluralisation of the intellectual sphere, for instance, is a case in point), is where the unevenness and contradictions arise. At the same time, this is also where postsocialism can be read as a fruitful source of creativity, a context fostering mechanisms of restless allogenesi.

2.4 IMPOSSIBLE REALISM

The process of unceasing pluralisation shapes contemporary China as an open, contradictory, fluid and complex field of reference, a multi-layered whole that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. The acknowledgement of China as an untotalisable whole testifies, accordingly, to the impossibility of generating yet another master discourse that subsumes its many contrasting drives. Since the purpose of the present dissertation is to account for a specific condition of contemporary Chinese cinema that is mainly concerned with the representation of the ‘real’ (however this ‘real’ is intended), some pressing questions at this stage are: how is it possible to visually portray an untotalisable whole? Since it is untotalisable, is it also unrepresentable? If postsocialist China is shaped by multiple fragmented meanings, how can the camera make sense of it?

By presenting theoretical arguments and in-depth analytical descriptions, the next chapters will attempt to answer these questions. However, before moving on to the following discussions, some major points in the relation between real/realism and postmodernism/postsocialism need to be clarified. According to Fredric Jameson’s classic theorisation, the postmodern world is characterised by a diminished, if not already ceased, relevance of realism. This is because realism as a style is usually associated with modernity: the ideal of unlimited human progress, the trust in grand narratives leading towards closure of meaning. Conversely postmodernity, as a stage of human development following the end of modernity, presents a fundamental fragmentation of this meaning. As Jean Baudrillard puts it, we are condemned to live in a state of simulation in which everything is appearance, a direct

contact with the real is impossible, and reality finally implodes into a 'desert of the real'.¹¹⁹ However, as argued in the previous sections, "Chinese postmodernism has more to do with the historic situation of contemporary China than general formalistic features of the global cultural fashion".¹²⁰ As under China's postmodern condition modernity does not come to a dead end but keeps on exerting its lingering influence, realism also proves its enduring relevance and consistency. This persistence of realism in times of postsocialism is thus justified by China's historical condition as an attempt of signification for a reality that, after the decline of socialism and in the chaos of reforms and overall transformations, appears to be largely incomprehensible. However, unlike Baudrillard's negative interpretation, Chinese filmmakers positively assert the relevance of the realist investigation and persist in their confrontation with the real. The complexity of the postsocialist condition should thus not be negatively assessed as the death of the real. On the contrary, we should evaluate how, under postsocialism, postmodern threats to reality can positively act as generators of new realist forms. In fact, as modernity is better expressed in the plural – modernities – Chinese postsocialism uncovers the possibility for a plurality of realist practices to concurrently display their own specific visions of reality. In other words, borrowing a terminology already employed in the discussion of Chineseness, the realist style should be productively unpacked. There is not one single version of realism and there is not one single approach to reality; instead, in a transvergent perspective, realism in Chinese cinema should be seen as an alienating form subject to constant mutation and pluralisation.

Almost echoing Gilles Deleuze's mantra "we need reasons to believe in this world,"¹²¹ Chinese filmmakers thus embark on a search for realist meanings and the most appropriate expressive strategies for their investigation. As a matter of fact, the representation of the real remains a central concern in contemporary Chinese cinema. From the rise of the New Documentary Film Movement (*xin jilu yundong*) in the 1990s to the affirmation of social documentary in the 2000s, from the independent/underground filmmaking of the so-called Sixth Generation (*di liu dai*) to the emergence of novel realist practices after the turn of the twenty-first century (such as those discussed in the following chapters), cinema in postsocialist China displays a pronounced engagement with a vast array of realist forms. Commenting on the various formulations employed to describe 'realism' in Chinese cinema since the 1990s, Sebastian Veg reports the unsatisfactory use of the term and casts doubts on its actual analytical usefulness. The scholar finally adds that, "if realism is to be preserved as an analytical category, it therefore probably calls for further refinement".¹²² Veg's remark is particularly inspiring and

¹¹⁹ Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations."

¹²⁰ Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 158.

¹²¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 172.

¹²² Veg, "Introduction," 6-7.

encourages scholars in the field to use the notion of realism more consistently. In this regard, Esther Cheung effectively suggests that, to achieve a better understanding of realism, it should be interpreted more in terms of “‘realistic motivation’ than as style alone.”¹²³ I maintain that it is exactly an idea of realism as authorial intention, that is, the will to productively tackle the real in any of its forms, that should inform our analysis of the realist practices in contemporary Chinese cinema. Realism under Chinese postsocialism should not be understood, according to modern parameters, as a meta-style coherently projected towards a point of closure that exhaustively accounts for the totality of facts. Rather, it should be conceived as an incessant attempt to achieve glimpses of subjective truth that could illuminate networked fragments of a wider interconnected picture. If for Braudrillard a direct contact with the real is impossible, I argue that what some contemporary Chinese filmmakers are pursuing and performing is just a brand of ‘impossible realism’. Denoting this Chinese realist variant as ‘impossible’ does not suggest a factual impossibility in engaging with the real, but rather it stresses the enterprising attitude of these directors’ efforts (their ‘realistic motivation’), their challenge to the global postmodern discourse, and the momentous relevance of their cinematic act.

The cultural translation of notions of postmodernity/postmodernism into the formulation of postsocialism, its unresolved legacy with the different forms of Chinese modernity, and its concurrent integration in and departure from the logics of the global order, delineate the post-national framework of contemporary China. Most relevantly, the above discussion points out the condition of interconnected pluralisation and creative unfinishedness that characterises Chinese postsocialism, while also providing theoretical justification for the uninterrupted evolutions of the realist style. In light of these considerations, the following chapter addresses film realism in contemporary Chinese cinema since the 1990s, focusing in particular on one specific brand: the so-called *jishizhuyi*. On the one hand, the analysis rethinks the cinematic composition of *jishuzhuyi* in contested and hybrid cinematic terms; on the other hand, it aims to define the transvergent mechanisms leading to the style’s future allogentic developments.

¹²³ Cheung, “Realisms within Conundrum,” 15.

CHAPTER 3

FOSTERING THE ALIEN

“There is no reason why a ghost should not
occupy an exact place in space”
(Bazin, “The Life and Death of Superimposition”)

Within a historical-cultural framework that allows for the pluralisation of meanings, realism still proves a central concern for contemporary Chinese cinema. However, in times of relentless transformations, its practice and significance undergo relevant changes that need to be critically assessed. Hence chapter 3 focuses on the so-called *jishizhuyi*, a specific brand of film realism that has widely informed the independent film scene of mainland China since the early 1990s. Inspired by direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* practices, *jishizhuyi* aims to highlight principles of objectivity and spontaneity in filmmaking to undertake a supposedly observational analysis of postsocialist China. But to what extent can we actually consider this kind of filmmaking as purely observational? If not under the agency of objectivity and spontaneity, what other factors combine to define it? By discussing *jishizhuyi* within its broader post-national framework, testing it against key theoretical debates and exploring its transnational cinematic associations, the present chapter aims to critically rethink the aesthetic proposition of the style. Whilst conventional analyses of *jishizhuyi* tend to downplay the relevance of the director’s authorial intervention in the representation of reality, the following discussion will instead identify the director’s subjectivity as the main driving force behind the cinematic creation. By subverting the fundamental assumptions of objectivity and spontaneity, *jishizhuyi* will be described in its heterogenous aesthetic composition, that is, not as a ‘pure’ film style, but rather as the product of multiple transvergent derivations. In other words, *jishizhuyi* will be defined as an already-alien subject caught in a process of continuous allogenesi; thus not as a fixed cinematic form, but as one that is constantly evolving into new aesthetic configurations.

Hence the chapter delineates the main features of a new aesthetic sensibility that has consistently informed the realist style in China since around the turn of the twenty-first century. More specifically, the discussion focuses on the characteristics of an allogenetically-modified *jishizhuyi* that, while unquestionably maintaining a distinctive ‘realistic motivation’ towards the representation of reality, nonetheless displays an understanding of film realism that differs substantially from previous practices. As I will argue, the pretension of objectivity is sublimated

into a 'feeling of the real' that privileges an emotional, rather than materialistic, take on reality. Accordingly, spontaneity plays a diminished role too as the contingent reality is increasingly subject to a process of creative aestheticisation that does not equate to sterile formalism, but rather combines into the production of meaning.

1. *JISHIZHUYI: AN ALREADY-ALIEN REALISM*

1.1 *JISHIZHUYI AND REALIST FILMMAKING IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA*

In order to understand the basis from which further stylistic developments would later take place around the turn of the twenty-first century, one first has to address the wave of realist filmmaking that has shaken the Chinese cinematic landscape since the beginning of the 1990s. Scholarship on film, both in China and abroad, refers to this current by adopting several labels, the most common being 'Sixth Generation', 'underground cinema', and 'independent filmmaking'. The quarrel about the most suitable label for these cinematic products already testifies to the multi-facetedness of the phenomenon. It proves difficult, in fact, to circumscribe this group of filmmakers within one single definition since they have never been organised as a coherent film movement. Moreover, this also casts doubt on the possibility of using a single notion to coherently embrace the many concerns expressed by this particular wave without erasing the different stylistic attitudes shown by the directors who take part in it.¹

'Sixth Generation', the most conventional of all the suggested labels, follows the traditional genealogical classification adopted in Chinese film history.² However, as Dai Jinhua points out, this term is both vague and ambiguous, and it may refer to at least three different film practices: low-budget films, either self-financed or sustained by foreign funds, produced independently from both the official film production and censorship systems, as in the case of Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*, 1992) and Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*, 1993); works by young directors working within the official system, including Lou Ye's *Weekend Lovers* (*Zhoumo qingren*, 1994) and Shi Runjiu's *A Beautiful New World* (*Meili xin shijie*, 1998); and documentary films, such as Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (*Liulang Beijing*, 1990) and Wang Guangli's *I Graduated!* (*Wo biye le*, 1992), which are

¹ Besides 'Sixth Generation', 'underground cinema', and 'independent filmmaking', other propositions suggested by scholars and critics include: urban generation, individualistic film (*geren dianying*), art film (*yishu dianying*), avant-garde film (*xianfeng dianying*), auteur film (*zuozhe dianying*), new wave film (*xinchao dianying*), Chinese dissident film, new imaginist movement, situation film, and new urban film. See Mo and Xiao, "Chinese underground films," 145; Dai, "A Scene in the Fog," 74.

² For a summary of the Chinese film generations, see chapter 1, footnote 3.

commonly better understood as part of the so-called New Documentary Film Movement (*xin jilu yundong*).³ Other scholars, including Sebastian Veg, note that two additional sub-waves can be distinguished: on the one hand, directors who have been active since the beginning of the 1990s and whose work focuses on the vicissitudes of the metropolitan life in the aftermath of the Tian'anmen crackdown (Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, Guan Hu, Wu Wenguang); and on the other hand, younger filmmakers who started their careers around the end of the decade, setting their films in the inland regions of the country and drawing on documentary aesthetics in a more conscious way than the previous sub-group (Jia Zhangke, Du Haibin, Wang Chao, Wang Bing).⁴

'Underground' and 'independent' are other denominations that are often employed to identify this group of directors and their works. These labels depart from the standardised generational classification of Chinese cinema and instead attempt to describe the mode of production and the socio-political relevance of these films. Their use, however, is not devoid of critical uneasiness. For instance, Paul Pickowicz argues that the term 'underground' is more appropriate for "capturing the unofficial nature of the work and the clear intention of these young artists to resist state control," since the word itself "suggests politically illicit, secret production that stands in subversive opposition not only to state domination of the film industry, but more importantly to the state's and the party's domination of political life."⁵ Nonetheless, most directors reject this strongly politicised label and rather opt for the relatively milder denomination of 'independent', a definition that itself needs to be better defined.⁶ In fact, this term signals an independence from the logics of the Chinese state, but not from the pressures of a series of additional factors that participate in the production and circulation of these films like, for instance, foreign co-production funds and the supporting agency of the international film festival circuit.⁷

As mentioned earlier, within this loosely defined group, directors show different stylistic approaches and therefore the application of one single critical umbrella to analyse their whole cinematic experience proves hegemonically inappropriate. My analysis is more precisely concerned with one specific trend that transversally informed the realistic production of the 1990s: the so-called *jishizhuyi* style. By working through this particular perspective, the investigation does not aim to account for all of the realist works produced in the period of

³ Dai, "A Scene in the Fog," 75.

⁴ Veg, "Introduction," 5. For critiques of the use of the label 'Sixth Generation', see Han, "Guanyu 'xin yi dai' qingnian daoyan qun"; Mo and Xiao, "Chinese underground films"; Dai, Zhang, Chen, and Zhu, "Xin shi pipan shu"; Dai, "A Scene in the Fog," 77-79.

⁵ Pickowicz, "Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China," 3-4.

⁶ Zheng, "Duli yingren zai xingdong," 4.

⁷ Cf. Berry, "Independently Chinese."

reference, nor does it contend that *jishizhuyi* can automatically be applied in some pre-determined fashion to all of the examples under consideration. Instead, my objective is to read this cinematic proposition transversently by considering the various nuances of the style's heterogenous composition. This approach does not amount to some post-structuralist reading aiming to attest an undefined constellation of stylistic exceptions. Conversely, it accounts for a number of critical detours that we can undertake in our analytical practice to update the standard understanding of *jishizhuyi*. By exposing the style's heterogenous conformation, the discussion concurrently underlines how this heterogeneity also represents the main productive force that has allowed *jishizhuyi* to develop into new aesthetic forms. In other words, I understand *jishizhuyi* as an already-alien subject: not a pure aesthetic notion, but rather the unfinished product of multiple derivations that would later morph into new alien configurations around the turn of the century.

Chris Berry understands the term as 'on-the-spot realism,' whereas *jishi* literally means 'to record reality'.⁸ However, the term was not created *ad hoc* for this particular filmmaking style, but has a significant history of its own. As a neologism, it was first adopted between the late 1970s and early 1980s to describe the style of the *baogao wenxue*, a genre of reportage writing claiming a truthful observation of the facts while maintaining an autonomous position with respect to the CCP. It entered into the vocabulary of film theory and criticism in the early 1980s with the Chinese translation of the works of French film theorist André Bazin.⁹ Throughout the decade, film literature used the term to indicate films experimenting with new realist techniques that were associated with Bazin's theories, such as long shots, long takes, synchronous sound, and location shooting. If, at first, it loosely referred to the kind of realism proposed by Fifth Generation filmmakers, it has since been utilised more consistently to describe the aesthetic proposition of the new realist wave of the 1990s (quite ironically though, as this latter group of directors has always strongly criticised the cinema of the Fifth Generation). In this context, the term *jishizhuyi* defined the "spontaneous and unscripted quality" of works that, by showing "handheld camera work and technical lapses and flaws characteristic of uncontrolled situations," further testify to these filmmakers' fascination with the methods of French *cinéma vérité* and American direct cinema.¹⁰

⁸ Berry, "Facing Reality," 124.

⁹ Although Cécile Lagesse dates the very first introduction of Bazin into China back to 1962 with the Chinese translation of his essay "Montage interdit," the first consistent references to his aesthetic coincide with the publication of a seminal article by female director Zhang Nuanxin and writer Li Tuo in 1979, significantly entitled "The Modernization of Film Language." In the same piece, the authors suggest the study of Western cinema as a means of modernising the outdated forms of Chinese film. See Zhang and Li, "The Modernization of Film Language;" and Lagesse, "Bazin and the Politics of Realism in Mainland China," 316.

¹⁰ Berry, "Getting Real," 122. For a historical contextualisation of the term *jishizhuyi*, see Berry, "Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Postsocialist Chinese Cinema," 119.

Jishizhuyi was thus discursively constructed in opposition to two previous realist traditions of Chinese cinema: on the one hand, *xianshizhuyi*, a general term that simply indicates 'realism', but that in common currency identifies the discredited socialist realism of the Maoist era; and, on the other hand, as briefly pointed out before, the realism proposed by the Fifth Generation, with its penchant towards allegory and visual stylisation. In contrast to these cinematic practices, *jishizhuyi* "rather than professing to show an ideological truth that underlies apparent reality [...] seeks to reveal a raw, underlying reality by stripping away the ideological representations that distort it".¹¹ By arguing that *jishizhuyi* expresses a "realism of the postsocialist condition" whose aim is to expose the contradictions of the contemporary age, Jason McGrath hence translates the term as 'postsocialist critical realism'.¹² In so doing, the scholar suggests a connection with the tradition of leftist cinema that enlivened the Chinese film culture of the 1930s and 1940s. As illustrated in chapter 2, this tradition, especially in the form of 'social realism', did not primarily attempt "to promulgate a new ideological vision of the world," but rather to investigate "the gap between a discredited worldview and the actual functioning of society".¹³ In a similar fashion, McGrath concludes that this postsocialist realism does not directly promulgate an oppositional ideology, but rather aims to suggest an indirect critique of mainstream ideology by focusing on the vicissitudes of social subjects usually under-represented in the Chinese cultural production.¹⁴ To achieve their socially-concerned objectives, *jishizhuyi* filmmakers have mostly been "imbued with the faith that just going out into public with a camera and capturing the unvarnished street life one finds there serves to unmask ideology while documenting the realities of contemporary China".¹⁵ However, as McGrath further argues, "the claim to oppose received ideological representations with the revelation of real life in its primary condition is itself ideological".¹⁶ Hence, for a more fruitful discussion of *jishizhuyi*, also in light of the post-national framework discussed in the previous chapter, we should understand the real that *jishizhuyi* filmmakers seek to explore "as a historically situated construct rather than as some nondiscursive thing-in-itself".¹⁷ Moreover, I suggest moving from ideological speculations to a critical analysis of the aesthetic practice itself as this would allow

¹¹ McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 132. In a note to the text, McGrath adds, "thus it is clear that a gesture of some kind of unmasking is essential to both socialist and postsocialist realism, the distinction between them being dependent on their historical chronology and changed ideological circumstances. Here is perhaps a universal trait underlying any rhetorical claim to an aesthetic of realism – the presence, whether implicit or explicit, of some previously existing artistic form that is held to be less 'real'." Ibid., 252n10.

¹² Ibid., 132.

¹³ Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 202..

¹⁴ McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 135-36.

¹⁵ Ibid., 136.

¹⁶ Ibid., 133.

¹⁷ Ibid.

us to rethink the propositions of *jishizhuyi* and better appreciate the implications of its stylistic configuration.

1.2 XIANCHANG AND AESTHETIC PRACTICE

To critically address *jishizhuyi* and rethink its overall stylistic composition, the analysis should start from the key assumptions that stand at the core of its aesthetic practice, embodying at once both the expressive goals of the filmmakers and the means through which they conduct their investigations of reality – the ideas of spontaneity and objectivity. An exploration of these concepts inevitably passes through the notion of *xianchang*, that is, the governing principle informing the whole *jishizhuyi* practice both as a theoretical formulation and an actual approach to filmmaking. In his attempt to provide a working definition of *xianchang*, Wu Wenguang, arguably the leading figure of the New Documentary Film Movement, states that it means “being on the scene at the present tense” (*xianzai shi he zai chang*).¹⁸ Wu’s definition immediately stresses the temporal and spatial value of *xianchang*, its specific focus on the physical presence of the filmmaker within the scene and the contemporary relevance of the object of representation. However, *xianchang* cannot be simply satisfied by being in a certain place at a certain time as it distinctively expresses a desire for spontaneity that is best fulfilled when the recorded event happens totally unexpectedly. In practical terms, this spontaneity is achieved by literally taking a camera down the street and letting it film the external reality as it unfolds naturally in front of the camera. In seemingly uncontrolled situations, the camera captures the real by adopting typical *cinéma vérité* devices (long takes, hand-held camera works, synchronous sound, and natural light) and records the spontaneous behaviours of people carrying out the activities of everyday-life. *Xianchang* is then primarily conceived as an aesthetic of the unpredictable in which the randomness of life itself shapes the structure of the film. In other words, as Luke Robinson contends, it should be interpreted as a matter of pure contingency in which the grasp on the unplanned and the unpredictable is not only a means to present some authentic values of the real, but also an end in itself. In this way, *xianchang* works to accomplish his main task, that is, revealing the ontological truth of reality devoid of any ideological falsification or allegorical mannerism.¹⁹ The work of the filmmaker thus coincides with the

¹⁸ Wu, “Xianchang,” 274.

¹⁹ For a discussion of contingency in relation to *xianchang*, see Robinson, “Contingency and Event in China’s New Documentary Film Movement,” 27. See also, Veg, “Introduction,” 10; and Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary*, 29-32. In his book-length study, with particular reference to the documentary practice, Robinson accounts for the increasing role of contingency/unexpectedness in the

attempt to harmonise the uncontrollable within the cinematic view, or rather to consciously act defencelessly to let the real be naturally encompassed within the frame. From this standpoint, *xianchang* echoes the propositions of Italian neorealist film theorist Cesare Zavattini and his poetics of ‘tailing’ (*pedinamento*) for which “time is ripe to throw away the scripts and tail people with the camera”.²⁰ According to him, “norms and rules of style are no longer needed [...] the form will be suggested by the case, by the thing happening and being immediately expressed [...] The only preordained thing must be what we are ourselves; and this is why the subject will be man as a whole, ready up against the facts, and helpless at the same time”.²¹

As for objectivity, this refers to the director’s attitude at the point of shooting. To *jishizhuyi* directors, it means faithfully portraying the raw facts of life as they unfold in front of the camera, giving up the perspective of an omniscient narrator so as not to manipulate the recorded reality. Zhang Yuan, arguably one of the leading figures in *jishizhuyi* filmmaking, is straightforward in his assessment of the issue: “I make films because I am concerned about social issues and social realities... I don’t like being subjective, and I want my film to be objective. It’s objectivity that’ll empower me”.²² Furthermore, “I can only be objective. Indeed, to me objectivity is crucial. Each day I pay attention to what happens immediately around me. I can’t see beyond a certain distance”.²³ This latter statement, “I can’t see beyond a certain distance”, perfectly expresses *xianchang*’s will to be ‘here and now’ and, accordingly, a programmatic refusal of what lies beyond the capacity of the camera and the borders of its frame. In this instance, I am purposely referring to the mechanical eye of the camera and not to the human eye or the director’s gaze, since the reality shown in this type of film aims to be, first of all, a recorded reality. The subject that is present *xianzai shi he zai chang*, “on the scene at the present tense,” is not primarily the director, but his camera. Objectivity is thus ideally performed by means of an observational approach to reality, which, according to Dai Jinhua, “presupposes a cold and nearly cruel style, in which the camera, replacing the witness, approaches the location in a sadistic, masochistic manner”.²⁴ As Wang Yiman puts it, within this observational perspective:

[the] individual amateur-author, is defined as an observer-participant whose limited perspective and personal involvement in what is still unfolding in a particular setting renders him/her a sympathetic and/or

development of Chinese independent documentary. This subject will be tackled more consistently in chapter 5.

²⁰ Zavattini, *Neorealismo ecc.*, 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 68, 75.

²² Cited in Reynaud, “New Visions/New Chinas,” 236.

²³ Cited in Dai, “A Scene in the Fog,” 94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

confused explorer, rather than an omniscient storyteller. Authorial status is thus linked not with supreme authority, but rather with his/her *present-ness* on the site of the event. To the extent that the event is still unfolding, the author's knowledge is necessarily limited, partial, and provisional.²⁵

Chris Berry underlines the shortcomings of such an approach to filmmaking. According to his analysis, the application of a rigid observational style leads to “an absence of any historical dimension or logic of change and development,” that combined with “this in-the-now temporality” and “on-the-spot observation creates a profound ambiguity”. It is in fact “unclear if [these films] are representative of anything other than the very specific events and people shown” as the director's own perspective and judgments are often hard to detect.²⁶ Berry accounts for this ambiguity as a constitutive part of the postsocialist condition whose rejection of grand narratives cannot but provide limited and contingent micro-histories. In light of the reflections undertaken in chapter 2, I suggest reading this postsocialist ambiguity in positive terms, that is, acknowledging how the unfinished agency of postsocialism actually works to generate a plurality of meanings. This critical stance is functional to approach *jishizhuyi* from a fresh perspective and to painstakingly explore a number of relevant questions: to what extent should we take the concepts of spontaneity and objectivity as absolute statements? What kind of (power) relation subsists between the two notions? To what extent is it possible to create a purely observational work? Are all *jishizhuyi* works invariably objective and observational? For instance, in her inspiring analysis of Wu Wenguang's cinema, Qi Wang challenges the common idea that works produced by the New Documentary Film Movement are to be considered as customarily observational. Conversely, she argues that these have been performative since the inception of the movement.²⁷ By extending and testing Wang's argument against the broader spectrum of *jishizhuyi* filmmaking (both fiction and nonfiction), the assumptions of spontaneity and objectivity can be freshly re-evaluated to understand their exact agency in the context of the style's aesthetic practice. Hence, the discussion below will take into consideration several significant scenes from a number of *jishizhuyi* works. Besides providing practical examples of *xianchang*, the following analysis will attempt to investigate the aesthetic construction of

²⁵ Wang, “The Amateur's Lightning Rod,” 18. Original emphasis. The word ‘amateur’ (*yeyu*) has to be understood following Jia Zhangke's connotation of the term. The ‘amateur’ is a filmmaker who opposes conventional filming practices by displaying a will to experiment with new cinematic forms. The idea of ‘amateur cinema’ does not imply lower quality standards, but rather underlines the filmmaker's intention to stress the relevance of marginalised aspects of everyday life. The seminal essay on the ‘amateur theory’ is Jia, “Yeyu dianying shidai jijiang daolai.”

²⁶ Berry, “Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Postsocialist Chinese Cinema,” 121.

²⁷ Wang, “Performing Documentation.” The idea of documentary performativity will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

spontaneity and objectivity in these works, and the mutual relation between these concepts. More specifically, I will focus on key moments in the *xianchang* logic, that is, when the unpredictable suddenly breaks into the cinematic construction.

The clearest examples of the *xianchang* effect can possibly be found in documentary filmmaking, from the debut works of the New Documentary Film Movement in the early 1990s to more recent productions. The inaugural, enlightening moment of *xianchang* can be traced back to Wu Wenguang's documentary manifesto *Bumming in Beijing*. A collection of unscripted and loosely connected interviews with young Chinese artists and intellectuals, the film depicts a disillusioned and bitter portrait of the Chinese cultural landscape in the years immediately following Tian'anmen. The most significant scene in the film shows one of the interviewees, artist Zhang Xiaping, as she experiences a dramatic nervous breakdown right in front of the camera. Wu perceptively senses that something unexpected is going to happen, but rather than motionlessly staring at Zhang with his camera, he decides to pan from her face to a tape player positioned next to her, and then back to an extreme close-up of her face. In the meantime, she has burst into tears. Later, Zhang throws herself on the floor and starts shouting delirious and unsettling fragments of sentences, peppered with all sorts of curses and undecipherable mumblings: "Ok, all right. Now God is speaking [...] Motherfucker, the sky's going to fall. God, oh God, can you hear me God? Who the fuck am I?" The disconcerting episode of Zhang's breakdown is still one of the most exemplary *xianchang* moments in Chinese cinema to date, but to what extent are spontaneity and objectivity rigidly observed here? Wu Wenguang briefly intervenes from his off-screen position to handle Zhang's delirium, but although this breaks the pretension of a purely observational style, it is not the main point that I am suggesting focusing on now. Rather, it is in the camera work described above – panning back and forth from Zhang's face before the breakdown takes place – that the two concepts are more subtly challenged. By performing such a camera movement, Wu aims to create a transitional effect of suspense: you see Zhang's face and guess that something might happen, then she is put off-screen, and when you see her again she has started crying. In order to manage this spontaneous, unpredictable event and make sense of it in expressive terms, the director cannot but fail to perform objectively, and rather signals his authorial position behind the camera.²⁸

²⁸ In her analysis of the scene, Bérénice Reynaud compares this camera movement to a scene in Ozu Yasujiro's *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949) in which something similar happens: in the first shot the protagonist is smiling, then the camera pans onto a transitional object – a vase of flowers in Ozu, like the tape recorder in Wu – and finally back to the character who is in tears. See Reynaud, "Translating the Unspeakable," 163-67. For further analysis of Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing* and related issues, see Reynaud "New Visions/New Chinas;" Berry, "Facing Reality" and "Getting Real;" Johnson, "A Scene Beyond Our Line of Sight."

This particular handling of spontaneity, filtered through a not completely observational style in which the director subtly reveals his active presence behind the camera, can also be found in Wang Bing's monumental *Tiexi qu: West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi qu*, 2003). This film is a nine-hour-long epic documenting the decline and eventual abandonment of a massive industrial area in North-Eastern China, which was the site of one of the largest steelworks in the whole country. Cruising through rusted tracks and dismantled buildings, at some point Wang Bing's camera happens to be in the right place at the right time. The action takes place in a tiny room of the factory's foundry. Lying on a bench, a worker turns to the camera and talks freely about his life and past experiences. Meanwhile, we hear other people entering the room, and one of them is even visible as he passes in and out of shot. Suddenly, an off-screen voice announces that the factory will close down in two days and that all of the workers are going to lose their jobs. The worker-narrator turns his face away from the camera and looks off screen towards the source of the news. At this point, the camera pans right and shows the man who has just brought the shocking news. When everyone has left the room, except for the first worker, the camera goes back to him and cuts to a medium close-up of his astounded face. For a few seconds, Wang Bing's camera focuses on the man, on his intense yet motionless bewilderment, just to cut again to a long shot of the factory in operation. The camera's movements and the cuts in this scene are somehow equivalent to the mechanism described with reference to *Bumming in Beijing*, that is, they combine to reveal the author's intention. In an even more pronounced way than in the previous example, the unexpectedness captured through *xianchang* aims here to amplify the relevance of the episode and expose its momentous revelation. By first capturing the astonishment of the chatty worker as he hears the news, then panning to the source of this news, and finally returning to the man who is now silent and shocked, Wang Bing not only bears witness to the enormous transformations affecting postsocialist China, but more significantly succeeds in describing their devastating effects on the lives of the individuals, uncovering the private sorrow entailed in the public passage from a planned economy to a 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.²⁹

Produced in 2009, Fan Lixin's *Last Train Home* (*Guitu lieche*) testifies to the enduring relevance of the principle of *xianchang* in the context of Chinese documentary filmmaking some twenty years after its first examples. This case is particularly interesting as the director is called to manage what possibly represents the utmost instance of spontaneity, namely, when the filmed subject looks into the camera and addresses the director and the audience directly. The film follows a migrant worker couple who go back to their hometown to visit their family during

²⁹ For discussions on Wang Bing's *Tiexi qu*, see Lu, "'West of the Tracks';" Wang, "Of Humans and Nature in Documentary;" Zhang, "Collecting the Ashes of Time;" Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary*, 63-67

the New Year holiday. At home, their rebellious teenage daughter is waiting for them. The situation looks complicated as parental anxieties and the youth's will of freedom add to the already problematic drama of distance and dislocation. One hour into the film, the father and daughter start arguing, the fight gets out of hand and the man begins to beat the girl furiously. The director films the scene from a distance, frames the two figures in a long shot, and just keeps on observing with his still camera. The violence of the scene has a disturbing effect on the viewer who is not permitted to look elsewhere. Then, suddenly, within this already unplanned context, an even more unpredictable thing happens: the girl turns her head towards the camera and in an outburst of rage addresses the director (and the viewers) directly: "You said you want to see my real life? This is my real life!"³⁰ Whereas one might contend that by maintaining a prolonged observational approach the director displays an objective attitude throughout the scene, the most relevant concern here is the implications of the girl's transgressive move. The traditional triangular balance between the subject, object and receiver in a given representation is regulated by a silent agreement in which every part occupies a discursive space that is distinct from the others. The contact point of these spheres, the camera, thus tends to be consciously forgotten to ideally achieve an unreachable utopia of a 'total cinema'. The act of looking into the camera, let alone addressing the director/viewer, significantly disrupts this balance by uncovering the constructedness of the cinematic apparatus.³¹

Although somehow disturbing, in documentary filmmaking this self-reflexive epiphany might turn positively back to the text, since to this heightened spontaneity seems to correspond a deeper realist authenticity. But does this work the same for fiction filmmaking? For its defining characteristics, fiction filmmaking relies on the assumption that the camera must be forgotten as what we see on screen is a narrative re-enactment of actions that imitate real life. The fictional layers of non-documentary works act as a filter for reality and, accordingly, *xianchang* requires a different application. Zhang Yuan's *Mama* (1990) is widely regarded as the inaugural film of the new wave of independent cinema of the 1990s. The film narrates, with a bitter and poetic touch, the relationship between a young mother and her mentally handicapped son in

³⁰ For an analysis of Fan Lixin's *Last Train Home* see Li, Lin, and Wang, "From Rural Poverty to Urban Deprivation?"

³¹ An inspiring parallel can be drawn between *Last Train Home* and *The Mirror* (Ayneh, 1997) by Iranian director Jafar Panahi. *The Mirror* starts as a fictional account of a little girl who, coming out of school, does not find her mother and decides to walk home alone through the city. Halfway through the film, the little protagonist looks into the camera and an off-screen voice tells her not to do it. Irritated by this reproach, the girl breaks the fictional illusion by declaring that she does not want to act any longer and leaving the film scene. At this point, taking an unexpected metacinematic twist, the film turns into a documentary that chases the girl around the city. Unexpectedness and the break of the cinematic illusion work here in an even more effective way than in *Last Train Home* as they also involve a pronounced change of ontological perspective. Other connections between Chinese and Iranian cinema will be transversely illustrated later in the chapter. The interplay of fiction and non-fiction strategies with specific reference to Chinese cinema will be addressed in chapter 5.

contemporary Beijing. The fictional representation is interspersed with documentary interviews with real mothers struggling to survive with their disabled children. Shot on a severely limited budget, filmed completely on location (the house of the protagonists is the director's own house), and starring non-professional actors, the film is often described as expressing an "extreme documentary style".³² However, on a closer look, its documentary potential does not appear particularly "extreme," at least in a literal sense. *Mama* actually displays a pronounced tendency towards stylisation that draws the film closer to certain avant-garde aesthetics than to observational documentary. For instance, many takes are organised to convey melancholic feelings through visual pleasure, e.g. in the close-ups of the mother's hand caressing the son's head and in the long shots of the child lying naked on the bed, which are carefully planned to obtain chiaroscuro effects. The juxtaposition of the fictional and documentary parts acts as a stylistic counterpoint to the director's overall confrontation with reality. As the film's scriptwriter Ning Dai states:

This was Zhang's debut as a director, [so only] once the shooting was over did he realise that the film was extremely short. Zhang Yuan then remembered that during the preparatory work he had interviewed the mothers of some handicapped children. Those interviews were exactly what touched him at first and made him fall in love with this topic; therefore he chose to include them in the film. The addition of these documentary parts entailed a radical change in the understanding of the film; as a result it posed questions regarding real life. For instance: where is the living space for disabled children? Is there any hope for them to survive?³³

In Zhang Yuan's *Mama*, *xianchang* is thus guaranteed both by the documentary inserts and the topic of the film itself. In other words, by shedding light on a subject matter that had never been approached before in Chinese cinema, the film conveys a sense of the 'here and now' due to its contemporary relevance and overall social urgency. In terms of style, *Mama* still displays a naïve aesthetic rendition of *xianchang*. Documentary and fiction, life and cinema, are distinct spheres that are consciously separated by the director. A distinctive use of colour further stresses this point: the fictional part of the film is shot entirely in black and white, while the documentary interviews are shot in grainy video and colour. Zhang adopts the *xianchang* method in a more straightforward manner in his second feature, *Beijing Bastards*. Following the

³² Dai, "A Scene in the Fog," 81-82.

³³ Ning, "La nascita del cinema indipendente," 152. Ning Dai also reveals that "in the original ending of the film, the desperate mother was supposed to choke her son as he had no chance of recovery. However, in 1990, we thought that the film could not end with a mother assassinating her weak and helpless child". Ibid.

vicissitudes of a rock singer (played by rock icon Cui Jian) and a group of underdogs that populates the underground music scene of Beijing, the filmmaker relies on a largely improvisational and visually unadorned style. Far from the aesthetic concerns of *Mama, Beijing Bastards* signals several contact points with the New Documentary Film Movement as a full range of documentary techniques is profusely adopted throughout the film, which also includes footage of Cui Jian's actual concerts and rehearsals. Although the feeling of the 'here and now' is still provided extensively by the shock of an unprecedented subject matter, the blend of fiction and non-fiction strategies is advanced here to a certain degree and consistently substantiates the aesthetic proposition of *xianchang*.³⁴

The application of *xianchang* to *jishizhuyi* fiction filmmaking can be pushed still further, and this would also testify to the progressive sophistication and increasing stylistic awareness in its use. Despite its sometimes ingenuous mise-en-scene, Jia Zhangke's medium-length film *Xiaoshan Going Home* (*Xiaoshan hui jia*, 1995) presents an interesting case that better circumscribes the issue. The film tells the story of Xiaoshan, a Beijing-based migrant worker, and his unsuccessful attempts to return to his native town to celebrate the New Year.³⁵ In this case, no separate non-fictional footage is added to the fictional narrative as the documentary part is already embedded in the fictional construction. Or rather, the fictional events are set distinctively against a real-life environment. The director orchestrates this interpenetration by adopting a rigorous observational style to the extent that, more than the vicissitudes of a group of outcasts struggling to survive in the big metropolis, the film's main interest lies in positioning a camera in an uncontrolled public space. Accordingly, the filmmaker aims to document the events as they take place spontaneously in front of the camera, without making any particular attempt to influence their natural development: people walking along the street, talking, and going shopping. With the aid of a sympathetic and non-intrusive, non-professional actor (Wang Hongwei), the viewer is persuaded to witness the unfolding of an unmediated reality and, hence, the feeling of being 'on the scene at the present tense' is particularly intense. However, applied to fiction filmmaking, this kind of observational style presents its own short-circuits. This proves quite apparent in the scene in which Xiaoshan and a female friend are eating street food along the road. Behind them, the woman who is preparing their food at some point notices the presence of the camera. With a baffled expression, the woman looks around to figure out what is going on there, and then curiously looks into the camera. In doing so, the woman reveals the ambiguity of her presence on the boundary between diegesis and extra-diegesis, disrupts the

³⁴ For analyses of Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards*, see Kuoshu, "'Beijing Bastards';" and Reynaud, "Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese 'Bastards'."

³⁵ For an analysis of Jia Zhangke's *Xiaoshan Going Home*, see Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola*, 148-51.

fictional balance sustaining the story, and hence highlights the fictionality of the scene in the foreground. Therefore, this is one case in which the spontaneity of the real erupts into the scene at the expense of the aesthetic consistency of the work, which accordingly calls for further stylistic refinement.

The best example of the relationship between *xianchang* and the supposedly observational style of *jishizhuyi* cinema in the 1990s is possibly expressed by the closing scene of Jia Zhangke's debut feature-length film *Xiao Wu* (1997). After being abandoned by his former best friend, his potential lover, and his family, the petty thief Xiao Wu is finally arrested and handcuffed to a pole in the street. Intrigued by such a scene, a silent, still, judgemental crowd gather around Xiao Wu. With regard to this scene, Jia Zhangke explains:

In the original script the ending was supposed to be of the old police officer leading Xiao Wu through the street, and eventually disappearing into a crowd. But as I was shooting, I was never really completely satisfied with this original ending. It is a safe ending, but also a rather mediocre one. During the twenty days of the shoot I was constantly trying to come up with a better ending. Suddenly one day when we were shooting a crowd started to gather around to watch us filming and I was struck with a kind of inspiration. I decided to shoot a crowd scene of people staring at him. I felt that in some way, this crowd could serve as a kind of bridge with the audience. Like the audience, the crowd is also spectators, but there is a shift in perspective.³⁶

The creation of the final scene of *Xiao Wu* thus started out of contingency, out of a spontaneous reality that was hostile to the fictional shooting plan: a crowd of people invading the set and disrupting the shot as it was originally conceived.³⁷ Unlike the examples described above, in this case the unpredictable real is neither regulated by a mechanical juxtaposition of fiction and documentary nor is it left to unfold freely. Conversely, by means of the perceptive intuition of "a shift in perspective," *xianchang* is set to fully express its cinematic potential. As the disruptive power of the spontaneous real enters the scene, it becomes functional to the

³⁶ Cited in Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, 46-47. For analyses of *Xiao Wu*, see *ibid.*, 22-49; Berry, "Xiao Wu;" Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola*, 152-57.

³⁷ Regarding this scene, cinematographer Yu Lik-wai states, "Because there are very few films produced [in Shanxi], the locals always got excited and quite curious at the sight of the movie camera, they would tend to huddle together off to one side watching. We thought of all kinds of techniques to avoid this, even considering getting another group of people to create a scene nearby to draw their attention away but nothing really worked [...] And in cases where that was impossible, we had to find other methods, like hiding the camera or appropriating guerrilla film-making techniques – shooting quickly and then hightailing it out of there – all of these are quite similar to documentary film styles". Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, 26.

director's authorial intention, which equates here with the utmost purpose of the *jishizhuyi* aesthetics: the overlap of cinema and the real, the transgression of the boundaries between the camera, the object of representation, and the viewer. In a single long take, lasting two minutes and thirty-seven seconds, Xiao Wu is first handcuffed to the pole and then left alone in the street. The camera frames him in a close-up (an unusual shot for Jia Zhangke, who privileges long if not extremely long shots) and after a few seconds, without breaking the mounting temporal tension, it pans to include the attending crowd within the frame. Unaware of the 'reality' of a film set, and both curious and amazed at the sight of a man handcuffed to a pole and the presence of a camera at his side, the people keep on staring at the scene with their eyes wide open. The camera frames them frontally and, as they look at Xiao Wu, they simultaneously peep into the camera and seem to address the viewer beyond the screen. In this way, the "shift of perspective" takes place fully, suggesting the identification of the viewer with the apathetic crowd, who are motionlessly watching the petty thief, now a helpless "zoo creature, behind the bars of the people's opprobrium".³⁸ By fully exploiting *xianchang*'s potential to intertwine the real and fiction and to draw the viewer onto the scene both visually and spiritually, the closing sequence of *Xiao Wu* promotes a reflection on the ethics of the gaze and the moral issue originating from it. To put it differently, in its finest expressions, *xianchang* not only suggests a general feeling of being present on the scene, the illusion of an unmediated reality conveyed by a number of material details technically recorded by the medium; more significantly, it suggests a reflection on the ethic and meta-cinematic power of the medium and the film style associated with it. In this specific case, it crystallises in a ferocious reflection on collective responsibilities with regard to issues of individual survival and exclusive social mechanisms.

For all of its power to capture the unadorned images of a raw, everyday reality, Zhang Zhen suggests comparing the method of *xianchang* to socio-anthropological fieldwork in order to foreground the sense of social responsibility entailed in the *jishizhuyi* practice.³⁹ By enhancing spontaneity and objectivity as key features, *jishizhuyi* filmmakers assume the role of observant witnesses facing the outer reality as it unfolds in front of their cameras. However, as shown by the several examples presented above, at the aesthetic level spontaneity and objectivity cannot be taken in their pure and general meaning. In particular, with regard to the issue of objectivity, I contend that it would be reductive to account for *jishizhuyi*'s advocacy of this concept only in terms of a naïve attitude on the part of the directors as if they were unaware of the ontological impossibility of reaching it via cinematic means. Rather, objectivity, as a specific authorial intention or realistic motivation, should be assessed in historical terms as an urgent need for

³⁸ Corliss, "Bright Lights."

³⁹ Zhang, "Building on the Ruins," 116.

existential reassurances in an historical limbo in which “the old idealisms have been broken into pieces and new idealism has yet to be born”.⁴⁰ Frustrated by the unfulfilled promises of History and disillusioned by the fakery of both socialist realist and Fifth Generation filmmaking, *jishizhuyi* directors seek a cure for their excruciating sense of loss. The remedy they find, almost as a psychological reaction, is to grasp the real in its eminently material form. Within a historical context that provides no certainties, they experience a quasi-physical necessity to touch the real like an object whose surface is recognisable with the touch of the hand. The transcendence of revolutionary ideals and allegorical parables that characterised the previous cinematic production ventured into places open to ideological mystification. *Jishizhuyi* directors, instead, want to start again from a safe point, closer to their individual everyday experience, which, while attempting a representation of the chaos of contemporary life in China, can also provide ontological certainty and stability. Despite statements such as those by Zhang Yuan cited above, Zhang Yingjin argues that, in its literal meaning, “‘objectivity’ is rarely a concern for most independent [*jishizhuyi*] directors; rather, the desire to reclaim the artist’s subjectivity is that which has motivated their dissociation from or competition with official and commercial filmmakers in the representation of the real”.⁴¹ By adopting the motto ‘my camera doesn’t lie’ (*wo de sheyingji bu sa huang*), *jishizhuyi* directors “have succeeded in re-establishing the artist’s subjectivity” and have established the syllogism “my vision, my camera, my truth”.⁴² It would thus be misleading to account for *jishizhuyi* as a purely and passively observational style as its major aesthetic tension lies in the search for a balance between the disruptive power of the real and the director’s authorial intention and subjective personality.

For a type of filmmaking that aspires to be an aesthetically conscious form of art, the major issue at stake is thus not so much the mechanical representation of an unmediated reality through a purely observational style. More than the pursuit of sheer objectivity, what *jishizhuyi* is mainly concerned with is the cinematic rendering of spontaneity. Through adopting the most suitable aesthetic strategies, *jishizhuyi* aims to make sense of this spontaneity and make it relevant within a larger context that calls into question the relationship between the camera, the object of representation, and the viewer. Zhang Zhen suggests a similar reflection, contending that *xianchang* refers to “the complex relationship between the filmmaker and his or her object of representation” and the “conscious aesthetic treatment of this relationship,”⁴³ to be conducted within a fluid “space in which the conventional boundaries that separate documentary and fiction, video and celluloid film, and professional and amateur practice are

⁴⁰ Liu, *Xiao shimin, ming zuojia*, 215.

⁴¹ Zhang, “My Camera Doesn’t Lie?” 27.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴³ Zhang, “Building on the Ruins,” 116.

challenged and transgressed”.⁴⁴ Similarly, Sebastian Veg states that “*xianchang* refers to a reversibility between the real scene and the film set, documentary and fictionalisation”.⁴⁵ By fostering spontaneity, or better still, the aesthetic treatment of spontaneity, the final goal of *jishizhuyi* is to blur the boundaries between subject and object, truth and fabrication, life and cinema. As it allows different textual levels to intertwine and variously connect, *jishizhuyi* can be approached as a rhizomatic system. In this light, it appears to be the ideal locus of transvergence as it constantly promotes a multi-directional and fluid attitude to reach its objectives. To avoid engaging *jishizhuyi* as an object floating in isolation within a space devoid of any historical determination and to take full advantage of the analytical possibilities uncovered by the proposition of transvergence, *jishizhuyi* has to be projected onto other dimensions and carefully considered within its broader post-national context of reference. In order to avoid too rigid an understanding of *jishizhuyi*, a series of fractures, connections, and detours have to be addressed. Cracks and ruptures such as those presented in the analysis above are not to be seen as inconsistencies devaluating the aesthetic proposition of this style, but rather as an index of its richness and pluralising potential. The following analysis further substantiates this understanding by addressing the theoretical and aesthetic construction of *jishizhuyi* as the heterogeneous result of multiple transnational, inter-textual and cross-media derivations. In other words, *jishizhuyi* is seen as an already-alien stylistic form that, due to its constitutive and intimate allogenic power, accounts for its present multiplicity and paves the way for future developments.

1.3 JISHIZHUYI IN TRANSVERGENT READING

The method of transvergence is able to reproduce itself *ad infinitum*. As its main purpose is to discard unilateral definitions of a given concept, each reader is allowed to suggest and analyse a number of different connections and interpretations as long as they prove consistent within the system of reference (that is, transvergence should not be taken as a totally anarchic space in which everything can be argued and verified). This endless possibility of self-reproduction points to acknowledging that the connections interrelating in our contemporary world are countless and act at various levels, including that of the unconscious. Hence not all of the influences detected with reference to a given object of analysis automatically presuppose awareness on the proponent’s part. However, transvergence is not exclusively concerned with

⁴⁴ Zhang, “Bearing Witness,” 19.

⁴⁵ Veg, “Introduction,” 8.

the tracking of influences. Its reading strategy can also suggest the simple juxtaposition of phenomena, especially at the inter-textual and cross-media levels. In this way, a number of contact points between different practices can be detected to understand the development of relevant trends in the post-national dimension. In other words, the following transvergent reading of *jishizhuyi* is only one option among numerous complementary alternatives that could be virtually undertaken.

Zhang Zhen suggests *zhuanxing* (transformation) as the main watchword through which to decipher the postsocialist age.⁴⁶ As *jishizhuyi* is a realist style of the postsocialist condition, it also relates to this idea of transformation, which, at the aesthetic level and in transvergent terms, translates as continuous allogenes. Interestingly, Zhang further comments that, “with this new tendency, Bazinian documentary realism, Kracauer’s phenomenology of material redemption, post-modern hyper-realism and other cinematic elements are constructively activated for the understanding and representation of the era of ‘transformation’”.⁴⁷ The juxtaposition of Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin looks particularly interesting. It suggests a specific tension internal to *jishizhuyi* as enlivened by two diverging, or better still, complementary drives: one uses the camera as a scientific tool to document the materiality of things and redeem reality’s pure physicality (Kracauer); and the other conceives cinema as a means to let the inner truth of reality emerge from the plain surface of things (Bazin). Realism from Kracauer’s perspective is a functional style, which relies totally on the technical possibilities of the cinematic means to present an illusion of reality on screen. As a development of photography, cinema has to provide systematic records of the external world: this is the correct ‘cinematic stance’ whilst the filmmaker striving to portray his/her personal dreams or obsessions on screen is just walking on an aesthetically unmotivated path.⁴⁸ As for Bazin, his film theory has not been read in China as an attempt to mechanically reflect the external material world, but rather has been understood as an approach to filmmaking that can encourage the development of a Chinese modernist cinema, which is finally detached from the conventions and alienations of the social(ist) world.⁴⁹ Grouping Bazin and Kracauer within the same definition of *jishizhuyi* looks particularly inspiring because it testifies to the principle for which, within the rhizomatic system, contrasting

⁴⁶ Zhang, “Bearing Witness,” 5.

⁴⁷ Zhang, “Building on the Ruins,” 117.

⁴⁸ See Kracauer, *Theory of Film*.

⁴⁹ For an exhaustive overview of Bazin’s reception in China, see Yong, *Zhuanxing yu yunshen*, 89-119. For a discussion of the critical attempts, in the mid-1980s, to set up a dialogue between Bazinian ontology and the theoretical thinking of Shanghai film critics of the 1920s, see Fan, “Approaching reality.” Zhang Xudong further states that, in Chinese film criticism, Bazin’s theory was not primarily subsumed under the label of ‘realism’ as this concept was mainly associated with socialist realism and other conventional modes of cinematic representation. Conversely, since its extensive introduction in the 1980s, Bazin was identified with less-accented propositions such as ‘theory of cinematic ontology’ (*benti lun*) and ‘long take theory’ (*chang jingtou lun*). Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, 236, 242.

ideas come to be seen as complementary drives rather than mutually excluding forces. This also reflects and makes sense of the internal contrasts between observational attitude and authorial intention described in the previous section. Although displaying different approaches and viewpoints, Bazin's and Kracauer's lines of flight intersect at a shared point of the rhizomatic system, namely that of the 'realistic motivation'. At this juncture, 'realistic motivation' seems less a broad indication of a general intention, and rather indicates a more definite attitude: the will to observe the real at close range without erasing the director's subjective presence from the scene.

Working within the post-national arena, it is possible to give up the pretension of conceiving the aesthetic practice of *jishizhuyi* as having originated from a non-discursive limbo. Conversely, its defining characteristics should be tested against three main post-national factors: first, the increasing exposure of Chinese filmmakers to the international cinematic landscape, both in the practice of transnational co-productions and their participation in international film festivals; second, the wider accessibility of films (especially foreign films) in China nowadays; and third, the lingering relation with indigenous artistic forms, both in the field of cinema and the other arts. In this respect, Gina Marchetti argues that realism in Chinese cinema "can be looked at as art about other art, images about other images, and films about other films. Often, a deceptively simple film can hide a complex web of cinematic citations that links it back to the silent era and forward to the digital future".⁵⁰ Within this intricate net, Marchetti particularly stresses the huge impact that the aesthetic tradition of Italian Neorealism had on the evolution of Chinese realist cinema, and more specifically of contemporary realist filmmaking. A shared use of classic realist, Bazin-inspired techniques (long takes, natural light, synchronous sound, real locations, etc) and a narrative interest in those left behind by social and historical developments make this link consistent.⁵¹ As the scholar further argues, only by mentioning the Neorealist masterpieces, Chinese filmmakers "[precipitate] a transnational wave of recognition" and link their films "to a local and global cinematic history".⁵² Italian Neorealism can thus be strategically adopted as an entryway into our rhizomatic system. Many commentators have acknowledged, first of all, a link between Italian Neorealism and the golden age of Chinese cinema in the 1930s and 1940s. In this regard, Zhang Yingjin points out the use of shared realist

⁵⁰ Marchetti, "Bicycle Thieves and Pickpockets in the 'Desert of the Real'," 62.

⁵¹ In particular, Marchetti mentions Vittorio De Sica's classic *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948) – one of the first foreign films to be imported into China after the foundation of the PRC in 1949 – as a major source of inspiration for directors as diverse as Xie Jin and Jia Zhangke. In the words of the latter: "Sometimes I have been termed a neo-realist filmmaker, and there is some truth to this, since I admire *Ladri di biciclette* [...] by Vittorio de Sica. It's a simple story about a man who is beset by problems in the impoverished environs of postwar Rome. But the film is essentially about the beauty of life, which is reflected in De Sica's assiduous observation of the surroundings: the sun, the light, the city." Cited in *ibid.*, 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 63.

conventions, such as the insertion of documentary footage into *The Big Road* and *The Spring River Flows East* (*Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu*, Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli, 1947); the use of actors whose real-life experiences approximate those presented in the film, as in the case of the protagonists of *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (*Baqian li lu yu he yue*, Shi Dongshan and Wang Wei, 1947); and the use of non-professional actors, who are sometimes even portrayed by means of hidden cameras like in *The Watch* (*Biao*, Huang Zuolin, 1949).⁵³ Similarly, by addressing Chinese films produced between 1945 and 1949, Leo Ou-fan Lee argues that these works “may be compared to post-war Italian neo-realist films in several respects: in terms of style and mood, of social realistic content, as well as the rather primitive and unsettled conditions in which they were made”.⁵⁴ Following a similar logic, as I have already argued previously in line with Jason McGrath (via Marston Anderson), *jishizhuyi* filmmaking can be linked to the experience of left-wing cinema of the 1930s-40s. In this way, a rich triangular relationship between the three cinematic traditions has been set.

However, to what extent does the transvergent exchange between *jishizhuyi* filmmaking and Chinese cinema of the 1930s-40s occur? How is this relation actually defined? In their firm rejection of both Fifth Generation filmmaking and, especially, Maoist socialist realism, *jishizhuyi* filmmakers arguably reconnect with the pre-1949 realist tradition of Chinese cinema. A first link is set with the current of social realism that “was linked to national crisis, leading to a dualist discourse of life and death, new and old, progress and extinction, oppress and oppressors.”⁵⁵ As previously illustrated, the same contradictory drives can be found in postsocialist China too, hence we can argue that both practices share the will to engage and interrogate an unstable reality subject to shocking transformations. However, if social realism tends to set a binary opposition between contrasting discursive spheres, *jishizhuyi*’s overall stance towards reality is pervaded instead by a fundamental ambiguity that blurs the boundaries between good and evil, victim and torturer, progress and regression. This failed point of contact appears even more clearly when evaluated against the other realist current of the time, namely critical realism, to which classics such as *Daybreak*, *The Goddess* and *Street Angels* are generally ascribed. Besides the Marxist ideological connotation that characterised these films, the association with *jishizhuyi* is further weakened by the style’s melodramatic attitude. In this respect, Pang Laikwan defines critical realism as an “engaging realism” in which it is “the high level of emotional engagement [that] facilitates spectators’ participation in the films effectively”.⁵⁶ As already illustrated in chapter 2, the melodramatic element is key to understanding Chinese realist cinema in a

⁵³ Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 111.

⁵⁴ Lee, “The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema,” 11.

⁵⁵ Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 77.

⁵⁶ Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, 198.

historical perspective. Whilst the Hollywood classic realist model is also fundamentally based on melodramatic conventions, an important difference should be acknowledged: while “Hollywood cinema ‘created’ realism by supplying causal motivation that addresses the viewer’s psychology, this Chinese left-wing cinema made its own by soliciting its spectators’ identification emotionally”.⁵⁷ Therefore, in this struggle between the cognitive and the affective,

The concept of realism used and postulated in this [left-wing] cinema was closer to European realist literature in the nineteenth century and the theories of socialist realism that Lukács developed on literature than Bazin’s cinematic celebration of the complexity and ambiguity of reality [...] The Chinese theories saw reality as basically innocent and lucid [...] these films were more in stride with the classic realist text, which does not and cannot deal with the real as contradictory.⁵⁸

Conversely, *jishizhuyi* filmmakers recognise the contradictoriness and ambiguity of the real, the void of master narratives and all-explaining ideologies, especially under the particular historical condition of postsocialism. Whilst left-wing films “[do] not and cannot deal with” contradictions, *jishizhuyi* directors look instead for a specific stylistic attitude through which to engage with the contradictoriness of reality. Although melodramatic hints can surface from time to time, the aesthetic choice of an unadorned visual outlook mostly corresponds to the suppression of overtly emotional tones. Chinese *jishizhuyi* directors do not set up an emotional perspective through which to detect the tensions of the real, but rather aim to point, in many cases, in the opposite direction: towards a Kracauerian and objective rendition of things, which is achieved through an observational attitude in which any eventual emotional hint is inherent in the unfolding of reality, and is not due to the director’s intrusion.

From this standpoint, by exploiting the transvergent potential of the rhizomatic system to perform cross-media detours, the possibility of projecting our discussion into the literary field appears particularly interesting. In Chinese contemporary literature, the so-called New Realism (*xin xieshizhuyi*) shares a certain Kracauerian attitude with *jishizhuyi* filmmaking.⁵⁹ New Realism surfaced in the Chinese literary panorama in the late 1980s and further developed throughout the 1990s in the works of authors such as Chi Li. Its purpose is to express the material reality of urban life by means of a realist style which promotes “a return to the original condition of real

⁵⁷ Ibid., 200.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 203.

⁵⁹ The term *xin xieshizhuyi*, coined by the editors of the literary journal *Zhongshan* in 1989, is translated by McGrath as ‘New Realism’ (see McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 62-73). Haoming Gong, instead, translates the term as ‘Neorealism’ (see Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 57-84). In order not to create confusion with other ‘neorealist’ practices, I will adopt McGrath’s suggestion for the present discussion.

life in its primary form, genuinely and squarely facing reality and human life”.⁶⁰ In their quest for an unmediated rendition of the real devoid of any political and ideological falsification, New Realism and *jishizhuyi* filmmaking share more than one fundamental goal. Refusing heroic situations and larger-than-life characterisations, New Realist stories, as well as *jishizhuyi* films, describe non-typical realities populated by ordinary urban dwellers, petty urbanities (*xiao shimin*) living in a mundane world in which the author’s attention is directed towards daily-life trivialities, detailed rendering of a regional setting and idioms, and an “everyday noneventfulness” in general.⁶¹ In terms of narrative structure, McGrath notes the limited scope of the New Realist stories, which sometimes are even reduced to a single day in the life of a character. This gives the sense that the New Realist world, like that of many *jishizhuyi* filmmakers, is a fragmented one, which can be investigated exclusively through the lens of individual perspective. In this way, echoing Chris Berry’s discontent with *jishizhuyi* observational works that I have previously illustrated, “the reality of the [new] realist work is incapable of transcending individual perspective and achieving a sense of social totality”.⁶² In this respect, Chen Xiaoming suggests ‘now-ism’ (*xianzaizhuyi*) as a fundamental feature of the New Realist wave, a concept that we can possibly identify as the literary counterpart of cinematic *xianchang*.⁶³ It is exactly this ‘here and now’ attitude that significantly distinguishes New Realism from all of the previous realist forms in Chinese literature, while at the same time posing a major expressive limit. What now-ism/*xianchang* in fact rejects is the possibility of transcendence (*chaoyuexing*), which is intended both as an enlightened critical view on everyday existence and society at large, and as an emotional catharsis to be achieved via melodramatic means. Enlightenment and heroism are thus frustrated by attention being drawn instead to the characters’ meaningless activities, daily chores that refuse to be encapsulated within an all-explaining grand narrative. New Realism grew out of a disillusionment with the whole project of modernity undertaken in the Reform Period and acted as part of an overall process of ideological desublimation, in which the euphoria for a dreamed modernisation was gradually eroded by a diffused sense of anxiety concerning the concrete hardships experienced by the Chinese people in their everyday lives.⁶⁴ Commentators such as Liu Chuan’e underline the limitations of an approach which describes life ‘as it is’ (*zhenshi de shenghuo*) and not the real life (*zhenzheng de shenghuo*), whereas this last concept implies some sort of inherent transcendence.⁶⁵ What is

⁶⁰ “‘Xin xieshi xiaoshuo de lianzhan’ juanshou yu,” 4. Translation in McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 133.

⁶¹ Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 71.

⁶² McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 63-65.

⁶³ Chen, *Biaoji de jiaolü*, 142.

⁶⁴ Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 69. In engaging with the idea of ‘desublimation’, Gong refers to Ban Wang’s study of the concept of sublime in twentieth-century China. See Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History*.

⁶⁵ Liu, *Xiao shimin, ming zuojia*, 215.

debated here is thus the literary counterpart of the contrast between a Kracauerian and a Bazinian cinematic attitude towards the real, an opposition between the physical (*xing'ershia*) and the metaphysical (*xing'ersheng*), which in New Realist terms translates to the victory of the former over the latter.⁶⁶ In other words, both the New Realist and the *jishizhuyi* mentalities show a positive attitude towards the actual possibility of grasping the unvarnished reality as it unravels in front of the authors through their act of writing/recording.

To achieve this goal in their aesthetic practice, language and form in New Realist works seemingly point to plain simplicity, an artistic gesture that also stands as a conscious reaction against the formal experimentations of the avant-garde fiction of the mid-1980s. However, as Gong Haomin insightfully notices, New Realist writers “inherited a considerable degree of sophistication from the avant-gardist movement”. In fact, these authors read the works of the Chinese avant-garde and it is precisely through the exact understanding of its proposition that they became acutely self-conscious of the representational nature of literature. In other words, the materialist realism of this new literary wave does not rely on naïve mimeticism, but is profoundly aware of the stylistic implications at work in the engagement with the real.⁶⁷ Similarly, despite their proclaimed opposition, *jishizhuyi* filmmakers relate tightly to previous realist traditions by means of a connection that goes beyond the simple binary contrast. An interesting case in point, which has already fuelled some academic debates, is Zhang Yimou’s film *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiu Ju da guansi*, 1992). Although Zhang’s works are usually ascribed to the aesthetic experience of the Fifth Generation, Jason McGrath defines this film “as a work of [postsocialist] critical realism”.⁶⁸ Besides the persistence of some trademark stylistic concerns (the distinctive use of colour, for instance), *The Story of Qiu Ju* does not belong aesthetically to Zhang’s previous Fifth Generation films.⁶⁹ The film in question is more pertinently understandable as a ground-breaking stylistic detour towards an almost documentary style that attempts a direct approach to Chinese contemporary reality through the use of non-professional actors, radio microphones and cameras hidden in real locations. By presenting this case, McGrath perceptively implies that the film might have set a new standard for realist filmmaking in China and, more precisely, for the kind of documentary-like style advocated by *jishizhuyi* filmmakers, despite the latter’s opposition to Zhang Yimou’s and Fifth Generation films in general. Sebastian Veg criticises McGrath’s understanding by arguing that it fails to appreciate the different attitudes displayed by Fifth Generation and *jishizhuyi* filmmakers. Moreover, Veg further comments that “while using realist, even *cinéma-vérité* aesthetics, [the film] remains

⁶⁶ Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, 63.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶⁸ McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 135.

⁶⁹ Here I refer to Zhang Yimou’s historical trilogy: *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lanterns* (*Da hong denglong gaogao gua*, 1991).

firmly within the framework of ‘critical realism’ first developed in the 1920s: a pre-scripted discourse criticising deviant elements to strengthen the nation-state and the Party that underpins it”.⁷⁰ This latest argument is consistent as, in fact, *The Story of Qiu Ju* is only superficially critical, while actually calling for the maintenance of the ideological status quo. However, for my analytical purposes, I find it more productive to understand this issue from a transvergent perspective, embracing McGrath’s suggestions. By following this path, we can appreciate the multi-directional meanings that, at the stylistic level, arise from this kind of interaction, namely, the breaking of the boundaries between supposedly contrasting practices and the degree of creative connection that can be productively exploited.

In the same spirit, I suggest moving beyond the Chinese national field and connecting *jishizhuyi* with other realist trends that appeared in the international film scene at more or less the same time, namely Dogme 95 and the Iranian New Wave. I contend that a closer comparative look at these phenomena could be useful to further appreciate the tension between observational stance and authorial sensibility, and to understand how *jishizhuyi*, as an already-alien style, continues to foster its hybridity to develop into newer forms. Seen in osmotic contact at the chaotic intersection of film festivals and other globalised forms of cultural fruition, these three cinematic waves have taken part in a shared rhizomatic system in which aesthetic attitudes and practices intertwine. However, the transvergent flow should not be seen as univocally heading in a single direction, i.e. ‘this style copied this other style.’ On the contrary, the discussion aims to foreground a series of transversal paths, discouraging unilinear analyses in order to achieve a vision of *jishizhuyi* as enlivened by internal complexity and productive instability.

Dogme 95 was a film movement founded by Danish filmmakers Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995, and programmatically declared over ten years later in 2005. Inaugurated by Von Trier’s *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998) and Vinterberg’s *Festen* (1998), the movement was consistently supported by a number of other noteworthy Danish directors, including Søren Kragh-Jacobsen (*Mifune / Mifunes sidste sang*, 1999), Lone Scherfig (*Italian for Beginners / Italiensk for begyndere*, 2000), and Susanne Bier (*Open Hearts / Elsker Dig For Evigt*, 2002). However, interestingly, Dogme 95 was not exactly an expression of Danish national cinema, but represented, more appropriately, a transnational wave that notably included among its proponents, to name but a few, French director-actor Jean-Marc Barr (*Lovers*, 1999); American independent filmmaker Harmony Korine (*Julien Donkey-Boy*, 1999), and Korean director Daniel H. Byun (*Interview*, 2000). The international scope of Dogme 95 distinctively facilitated the interplay of post-national transvergent exchanges and, in our case, theoretically

⁷⁰ Veg, “Introduction,” 6. Original emphasis.

substantiates the comparative connection within the rhizomatic system of *jishizhuyi*. With “the expressed goal of countering ‘certain tendencies’ in the cinema today,” Dogme 95 called for cinematic purity against the fakery of spectacular post-production effects and other film techniques that proved historically guilty of alienating the audience away from what should be the primary focus of a film, namely the story and the actors’ performance. According to the Dogmatic critique, “the movie had been cosmeticized to death” under the pretension of auteurism, and hence the very notion of auteur should be strongly criticised: “The *auteur* concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby... false! [...] cinema is not individual!”⁷¹ Within their respective contexts of reference, both Dogme 95 and *jishizhuyi* filmmaking thus oppose the supposed fakery of previous cinematic practices: the degeneration of the *nouvelle vague* poetics in the former case, socialist realism and Fifth Generation filmmaking in the latter instance. More specifically, Dogme 95 aesthetically performed this opposition through its abidance by ten rules, famously enunciated by Von Trier and Vinterberg in the wave’s manifesto, and emphatically entitled “The Vow of Chastity”:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images, or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene has been shot.)
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.)
4. The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.
10. The director must not be credited.⁷²

⁷¹ Von Trier and Vinterberg, “Dogme 95,” 87. Original emphasis. By referring to “‘certain tendencies’ in the cinema today”, Von Trier and Vinterberg mimic François Truffaut’s seminal essay “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema.” See Truffaut, “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français.”

⁷² Von Trier and Vinterberg, “Dogme 95,” 88.

As the rules show, Dogme 95 and *jishizhuyi* filmmaking significantly share a number of cinematic techniques and aesthetic preferences: unadorned on-location shooting, synchronous sound, hand-held camera, and natural light. The choice of these expressive techniques is also connected to what Von Trier and Vinterberg defined as, “the ultimate democratization of cinema” that has to be achieved through “a technological storm” of the more accessible, lighter, and cheaper cameras now available on the market, to the extent that “for the first time, anyone can make movies”.⁷³ Resonating with Jia Zhangke’s advocacy of ‘amateur cinema’, this position finds parallels in the Chinese context too as it anticipated the flourishing of DV productions that were to rise in number from the second half of the 1990s. More specifically, with regard to the ‘chastity’ rules, number seven (“the film takes place here and now”) is particularly relevant to the present discussion. Besides echoing the Aristotelian principle of time and space unity, this proposition more importantly recalls Wu Wenguang’s theorisation of *xianchang* as ‘being on the scene at the present tense’, a formula that shares the Dogmatic idea that “the instant [is] more important than the whole”.⁷⁴ Although Dogme 95 also stated that its “supreme goal is to force the truth out of [...] characters and settings,” therefore almost sounding Bazinian in its intentions, I suggest that it actually showed a distinctive Kracauerian attitude in the practice of its specific form of *xianchang*. The manifesto in fact argued that, “the movie is not illusion! [...] The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind [...] I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a ‘work’”.⁷⁵ Once the presence of the director-artist is removed, what remains is a supposedly objective perspective on reality, a position that Dogme 95 maintained in even stricter aesthetic terms than *jishizhuyi*.⁷⁶ However, within this set of strict rules, occasional transgressions did take place. It is possible to argue, in fact, that the Dogmatic restrictions were circumvented, more or less seriously, from the very beginning: Vinterberg used a particular prop to adjust the light in one scene of *Festen* and Von Trier used non-diegetic music in *The Idiots*, for instance. Examples connected to Dogme 95 (that is, not strictly considered as Dogme films but apparently sharing that certain cinematic attitude) prove to be even more interesting. Lars von Trier’s filmography provides us with a couple of relevant examples in this respect, namely *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). *Breaking the Waves* is the story of a woman who manages to save the life of her paralysed husband by increasingly submitting herself to a process of moral and physical self-sacrifice. The film displays an overall Dogme outlook, but its main transgression lies in the

⁷³ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 87-88.

⁷⁶ For in-depth analyses of the Dogme 95 movement see Kelly, *The Name of This Book is Dogme 95*; Roman, *Digital Babylon*; Hjort and MacKenzie, *Purity and Provocation*; Bainbridge, *The Cinema of Lars von Trier*.

attempt to transcend the strict 'here and now' by powerfully sketching the Christological parable of its protagonist who finally achieves a miraculous end. *Dancer in the Dark* pushes the boundary even further, starting from a Dogme basis and then turning into a musical, therefore simultaneously deconstructing Dogme and the classic American tradition of this particular genre. These modifications of the Dogme aesthetic patterns look especially significant as they testify to the degree of internal heterogeneity and fundamental complexity of any cinematic style as well as to the constant allogenesis that is relentlessly working to create newer hybrid forms.

The ideas of aesthetic transgression and stylistic detour are key points in my analysis as they play a relevant role in the *jishizhuyi* practice too. To better understand this argument, I suggest continuing the comparative analysis by focusing on those points in the rhizomatic system in which *jishizhuyi* transversely intertwines with the so-called Iranian New Wave. Taking the international film scene by storm in the mid-1980s, this cinematic trend was inaugurated with works by filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, Amir Naderi, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and then continued to flourish throughout the 1990s with a younger generation of directors including Jafar Panahi, Samira Makhmalbaf, and Bahman Ghobadi. The Iranian New Wave has occasionally been compared to Italian Neorealism for its use of Bazinian film techniques as well as its commitment to representing the lowest social classes.⁷⁷ As for *jishizhuyi*, a first shared point lies in the similar production conditions that affected both practices. Small budgets, a lack of advanced technologies, and the almost clandestine way in which some of these films were shot due to censorship problems led to parallel aesthetic outcomes. The production history of Bahman Ghobadi's feature-length debut *A Time for Drunken Horses* (*Zamani barayé masti asbha*, 2000) provides an interesting case in point. The story, set in the Iranian Kurdistan, tells of an orphan boy struggling to collect money for a medical operation for his handicapped brother. The film ends abruptly *in medias res*: caught in an ambush while they are trying to smuggle a mule beyond the state border, we see the two kids slipping away through the border fence, while the action is still going on and the narrative structure has not yet reached its closure. Facing such an unfinished finale, the viewer remains baffled and can only imagine the ideal development of the story. The director admits that this ending was not planned in the script, but rather was dictated by pure contingency: as an independent production working on a very small budget, they had just finished their stock of print and were thus unable to keep on shooting. Echoing the hardships of many Chinese independent works, this and other similar circumstances call into question the filmmaker's handling of unexpected and contingent

⁷⁷ For analyses of the Iranian New Wave, see Issa and Whitaker (eds), *Life and Art*; Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*; Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*; Khaterah, *Poetics of Iranian Cinema*. For an interesting Chinese-language study on the relationship between the Iranian New Wave and the Sixth Generation see Gao and Ren, *Jingxiang dongfang*.

occurrences. In *Xiao Wu*, an external, extra-diegetic spontaneity was managed by encompassing it within the diegetic structure; in Ghobadi's film, the contingent agency was faced by modelling the film editing, and encouraging the viewer to imagine an ideal end to the story.

Facing this and similar challenges, what is the attitude that these directors assume when approaching the real? By means of what aesthetic choices and cinematic techniques do they attempt to represent reality? From the start, Jafar Panahi's *The Circle* (*Dayereh*, 2000) relentlessly follows, or rather runs after, its many characters. Cinematically applying Zavattini's concept of 'tailing', the camera shadows a number of women, all ex-convicts, who have been discriminated against and ostracised by Iranian society: they roam stealthily through the streets, secretly get on buses, and hide around the corner to avoid the police. By chasing its characters in the course of uninterrupted long takes, the camera concurrently documents their actions in the larger context of Iranian society. Similarly, *Beijing Bastards* follows its underdog heroes in and out of the scene, describing the rock'n'roll underground world and concomitantly its distance from the wider Chinese society. In *Xiaoshan Going Home*, the camera literally travels through Beijing with its protagonist, highlighting the chaos of the city and the simultaneous exclusion of the main character from its logics. In all of these cases, the tailing of the characters goes hand in hand with the revelation of the external environment, that is, the city – Tehran or Beijing – depicted as a chaotic hub of social and moral tensions. In this regard, Ning Ying's Beijing trilogy – *For Fun* (*Zhao le*, 1993), *On the Beat* (*Minjing gushi*, 1995), and *I Love Beijing* (*Xiari nuan yangyang*, 2001) – deserves a special mention. Tailing a bunch of elderly people, a group of police officers, and a divorcing couple respectively, Ning Ying aims to contextualise the confused psychologies of her characters within the broader transformations of the city.⁷⁸ Pushing this analysis a little further, it is interesting to compare *I Love Beijing* with Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (*Deh*, 2002) as both films stage a relevant part of their story (and, more precisely, the whole story in the case of *Ten*) inside a car. From within the vehicle, the viewer comes to know both of the characters and the world around them. The fundamental difference between the two works is that, in Ning Ying's film, the city is actually portrayed on screen through and beyond the car's window, whereas in Kiarostami's, the city is almost completely suggested as an off-screen presence, and is only evoked through ambient sounds and the characters' conversations. *Ten* – a deceptively improvisational work portraying a mother discussing with his son themes of both contemporary and universal relevance – is framed by a fixed camera positioned on the car's front window. No camera movements and no other visual perspective are allowed; there are only nine short black intervals dividing the ten fragments of which the film is composed. Representing, to some extent, the apex of an aesthetical (and largely theoretical) discourse

⁷⁸ For an analysis of Ning Ying's trilogy, see Cui, "Ning Ying's Beijing Trilogy."

which Kiarostami has coherently pursued throughout his whole career, *Ten* performs a constant and stubborn act of staring that is activated by means of a fixed camera (unlike the hand-held cameras of the previous examples), which leaves the external world outside of the frame. The real against which the character's conversations find a signification is purportedly left off screen, and the single shot proposed throughout the whole film does not allow us to see much beyond the characters' bodies. Kiarostami thus puts the viewer in an uncomfortable position: we are literally 'on the scene' (we are travelling with the protagonists) but, at the same time, our 'being there' is unnatural as we are ideally positioned on the car's front window and are prevented from appreciating a broader visual scene.

The purpose of such an aesthetic approach can be further illustrated with reference to another film by Kiarostami, *Life, and Nothing More* (*Zendegi va digar hich*, 1991), in which the viewer travels with the protagonists through a land devastated by a massive earthquake (the real Manjil-Rudbar earthquake that hit north-western Iran on 21 June 1990). As the view range is extended to long and extreme long shots, the abundant use of long takes combines to unearth the surface of the real, already materially and symbolically traumatised by the natural catastrophe. The sense of contingency and spontaneity that characterises other works is lessened here in favour of a more contemplative stance, which provides a poetic if not even philosophical perspective through which the director engages with reality. It is an aesthetically-refined Bazinian realism that submits contingency to poetic concerns, and attempts a transfiguration of reality through a distinctive use of the long take, here a means to let an inner truth of life emerge from the plain surface of the real. Within the osmotic transvergent connections of the rhizomatic system, an approach to reality mediated by long if not extremely long shots and insisted contemplative long takes has found its proponents in contemporary Chinese realist cinema too, and this signals a changing attitude towards the investigation of the real. Already mentioned as an example of *jishizhuyi* with reference to the management of contingency, *Tiexi qu* richly displays this specific stance. One for all, the opening sequence: an extended long take in which the camera/viewer is positioned on the front of a train that crosses the snowy area of the dismissed factories. Focusing on rusted rails covered in snow, skeletons of factories and nothing else around, the train travels through space and ideally through time as, by means of an insistent action of staring, the director seeks to unearth deeper meanings from the industrial surplus shown by the camera. However, the fixity of the camera is not a compulsory element of this attitude. A pertinent example, to get back to Jafar Panahi, is the closing long take of *The Circle*. In a shattering sequence displaying the director's narrative and stylistic mastery, the multiple stories presented throughout the film reach a temporal and spatial closure: panning from right to left and performing a circular movement, Panahi's camera shows us all of the women in his film simultaneously imprisoned within the same cell. As I will show in

the following chapter, this particular type of panning was to become a trademark in the cinema of Jia Zhangke as well: the preference for panoramic shots, to be performed at a slow pace, aiming to show the surrounding scene in order to uncover concealed meanings. Suggesting a heightened contemplative sense, the cinematic construction is taken here to a different aesthetic level, one signalling a changing stance towards the issue of spontaneity. Hence, as creative aestheticisation increasingly becomes a fundamental component of Chinese realist cinema, *jishizhuyi*'s here-and-now display of pure contingency falls into representational crisis and calls for an updated assessment. Before taking up this task in the following section, Ning Dai's words on the essence of *jishizhuyi* filmmaking prove illuminating:

We really were the 'Beijing bastards' (*Beijing zazhong*). We were not naïve; we understood that the beauty of the past was a lie, we could see the true and the false, and reality too. We lost our so-called innate spiritual balance. This 'bastard' nature was not a matter of race. As we had grown up within a specific environment and a particular historical period, we acknowledged multiple lessons and various ideological influences, like an embryo born by the crossbreed with another species that, in its process of development, gives life to a new species in turn.⁷⁹

Ning Dai describes brightly the hybrid nature of *jishizhuyi* as an already-alien formation, "an embryo born [...] by crossbreed" at the juncture of different styles and practices, and therefore not dogmatically 'pure' in its essence. By conceiving *jishizhuyi* as a rhizomatic system enlivened by contrasting/complementary drives, we are also led to appreciate its transformative potential as a "species that, in its process of development, gives life to a new species in turn". Hence the following section will focus on the allogenetic power of *jishizhuyi* in order to comment consistently on its later developments and aesthetic transgressions.

2. JISHIZHUYI AND ALLOGENETIC MODIFICATIONS

2.1 A FEELING OF THE REAL

A positive stance towards the possibility of the medium to effectively give account of the unvarnished real is a major aspect of *jishizhuyi* production. A set of specific aesthetic principles have been put to use to create a cinematic style that corresponds to this position; however, as

⁷⁹ Ning, "La nascita del cinema indipendente," 153.

the abovementioned examples testify, there are stylistic exceptions. The allogenic activity of *jishizhuyi*, fostered by the multiple interplays taking place within the post-national rhizomatic system, has contributed to progressively altering the nature of this style and finally turning it into something other than itself: a number of stylistic detours rooted in the *jishizhuyi* proposition yet presenting relevant aesthetic transgressions. This reveals a fundamental change in the filmmaker's attitude towards reality. Life as it simply passes in front of the camera is no longer enough to comprehensively address the Chinese situation, and the idea that the camera lens alone can provide an exhaustive account of contemporary reality has been dismissed as a limited and naïve approach. If we are to point out a year that signalled this change in attitude, the turn of the twenty-first century represents a consistent starting point. Besides the symbolic value of the date, a series of factors combined to affect film production in China around that time and accordingly prompted a renewal of the cinematic language too: the socio-economic consequences of China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organisation; the increasing diffusion of digital technologies and the technical enhancement in their use; the consolidation of professional links with the international film industry, resulting in stable co-production and distribution agreements and extensive exposure in the film festival network; the wider circulation of foreign films through manifold channels of exhibition; and the increasing perception that established film forms had reached a point of expressive insufficiency. However, more than expressing a desire for strict periodisation, the identification of this key date in the process of allogenic development is primarily based on practical evidence. It was in fact around the year 2000 that the stylistic evolutions under consideration started to take shape more consistently. For instance, that was the release year of films such as Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* and Jia Zhangke's *Platform (Zhantai)*, two works that clearly departed from previous cinematic practices by showing an increasing penchant towards stylisation, and privileging disorienting tones and puzzling atmospheres while preserving a distinctive realistic stance.⁸⁰

Commenting on the assumption of objectivity, director Jiang Wen straightforwardly states that "everything is subjective, and objectivity resides in subjectivity"⁸¹ On the same topic, Jia Zhangke provides a subtle insight that substantiates the claim of allogenic developments in contemporary Chinese realist cinema:

Through all these, I am imparting a director's attitude, how he sees the world and the cinema. What I mean to say is that it's only an attitude because you can never be absolutely objective. When you need somebody to look at something, it's no longer objective. There is no

⁸⁰ For a close reading of *Suzhou River*, see chapter 4.

⁸¹ Cited in Cheng and Huang, *Wo de sheyingji bu sa huang*, 77.

absolute objectivity, there is attitude, and through this attitude, there is an ideal.⁸²

Discarding the pretension of pure objectivity and equating the act of filmmaking to a personal attitude, Jia Zhangke's statement opens the path to a fresh approach to reality. Echoing Bazin's well-known statement "every realism in art was first profoundly aesthetic,"⁸³ Jia suggests a shift in perspective with regard to what is to be considered the real eye on the world: no longer the camera lens or any sort of Vertovian *kino-glaz*, but the director's own sensitivity. Further commenting on this issue, Jia adds:

According to me, all the realist modes are there to describe the real world of my inner experiences. We have almost no way to approach reality itself, and after all the sense of cinema is not merely reaching the level of reality. In films, I pursue a feeling of the real more than reality itself, since I think the feeling of the real concerns aesthetics, whereas the real is only a matter of sociology.⁸⁴

The conceptualisation of a "feeling of the real" (*zhenshigan*) as opposed to "the real" (*zhenshi*) inevitably marks the crisis of "recording reality" (*jishi*) as a cinematic practice. Once the limits of the camera have been acknowledged and the emotional perspective asserted, then the director can convey his/her truth, not only by means of the details of the material world, but also by foregrounding his/her perception of these. Unlike Jameson's verdict on the death of the subject in the era of postmodern fragmentation, under the condition of Chinese postsocialism the centrality of the subject appears increasingly emphasised. Director Zhang Ming comments: "Who has ever obtained truth? Truth itself never exists in a work of art. What we have are the author's vivid imagination, his attitude, taste, sensibility and personality, as well as the extent to which you as an audience member identify with all these items".⁸⁵ Zhang Ming's dismissal of 'truth' (*zhenshi*) highlights the centrality of the director's subjective interpretation of the real. In other words, the author is not concerned mainly with the material details of an external reality, but rather with the subtle particulars of something stretching beyond the visible, towards the realms of feelings and emotions. Such poetics resonate with the construction of left-wing 'engaging realism' for which, as Pang Laikwan puts it, "it is the coherence and the solidarity of its narrativity and its emotion that authenticates the film as a realistic representation of the human's world".⁸⁶ However, post-*jishizhuyi* realism does not signal a return to the melodramatic

⁸² Cited in Teo, "Cinema with an Accent."

⁸³ Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume 2*, 25.

⁸⁴ Cited in Sun, "Jingyan shijie zhong de yingxiang xuanze."

⁸⁵ Zhang, *Zhaodao yi zhong dianying fangfa*, 27-28. Translation in Zhang, "My Camera Doesn't Lie?," 27.

⁸⁶ Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, 213-14.

form, but rather it mediates complexly between the materialistic 'coolness' of *jishizhuyi* and a 'warmer' cinematic rendition which, by appealing to the audience's feelings, aims to build bridges of emotional identification between the viewer, the represented real, and the director's vision of the world.

As, under these evolving allogenic conditions, expressing a feeling of the real becomes the purpose of the realist filmmaker, the tension between the Bazinian and Kracauerian drives inherent in the *jishizhuyi* practice is in turn affected. Whereas *jishizhuyi* has intentionally clung more to a Kracauerian vision of reality, this new approach ostensibly privileges the Bazinian attitude. It is an existential realism characterised by a will, on the director's part, to participate in the inner life of the world and, through this act of participation, it aims to unveil subtle fragments of truths and hidden meanings. However, even more than Bazin, a third cinematic vision, suggested by Italian critic Guido Aristarco, proves useful to grasp the spirit of the post-*jishizhuyi* proposition. Despite being a Neorealist film critic himself, Aristarco holds a viewpoint that is somehow opposed to Zavattini's, so that the latter's aesthetic of 'tailing' is finally replaced by an aesthetics of poetic construction. In Aristarco's own words: "Truth no longer coincides with the external reflection of the world, but identifies itself with poetic creation".⁸⁷ In order to accomplish this ultimate task, cinema cannot be confined to the act of observing, recording, and passively describing reality 'as it is'. Conversely, filmmaking should participate spiritually in the narration of the real in order to provide an exhaustive account of its inner mechanisms, elusive logics, and concealed significances. Looking for a broader dimension in which to conduct its cinematic analysis, Aristarco's idea of realist filmmaking goes beyond superficial descriptions and points instead to social, psychological, and even transcendent investigations. In other words, Aristarco advocates a 'critical realism' as opposed to a purely descriptive one, namely, a cinematic approach that is not only able to reflect on the 'here and now', but more extensively on a larger historical and spiritual condition.⁸⁸ By overcoming direct cinema inclinations and professing a feeling of the real against the principle of an unattainable objectivity, post-*jishizhuyi* films accordingly redefine the core notion of realist authenticity by asserting that nothing is more authentic than our own individual sensitivity. Hence the *jishizhuyi* assumption that authenticity coincides with spontaneity is radically discarded through the implementation of visual and aesthetic concerns that match the author's personal sensibility and subjective re-interpretation of the world. More than showing an interest in the spontaneous unfolding of an unvarnished reality, the image is now carefully arranged at the point of shooting and minutely

⁸⁷ Aristarco, "La terra trema."

⁸⁸ See Aristarco, *Storia delle teorie del film*.

decorated at the post-production stage. In other words, post-*jishizhuyi* works meaningfully undergo a process of creative aestheticisation.

2.2 A PROCESS OF SUPERNATURALISATION

In his *Logique du cinéma*, Albert Laffay, a precursor of film narratology, states that, “the real is never aesthetic by itself. If cinema is an art, it needs to be something other than the double of the existing world”.⁸⁹ Jia Zhangke ideally follows this position by advocating that, as a form of art, the aesthetic component of cinema has primary importance: it works to unveil the essence of things through the filmmaker’s psychological elaboration.⁹⁰ Therefore, as “the feeling of the real concerns aesthetics”, it is in aesthetic terms that we have to account for this changing stylistic attitude. As Zhang Yingjin puts it, “the question that obsesses them [Chinese realist directors] most [...] is not ‘Does my camera lie?’ but ‘How can my camera capture what I perceive as truthful?’”⁹¹ The main concern of realism thus shifts from a preoccupation with the contingency of the material world to its creative interpretation, to the extent that the purpose of realist filmmaking now “is not whether it divulges an elementary reality so much as how it constructs the powerful impression of a confrontation with reality through the rhetoric of a film’s narrative and its cinematic style”.⁹² In this respect, what keeps on conferring a distinguishable realist character to this cinema, borrowing Cécile Lagesse’s words: “is no longer the physical link between images and reality, but rather the director’s presence within the recorded reality [...] Cinematic realism would no longer only concern the power of recording images, but rather the perception of reality that the viewer can get through the link that the director establishes between his camera and the real”.⁹³ The distinctive way through which some contemporary Chinese directors operate this act of mediation perfectly echoes what Bazin defines as “a process of ‘supernaturalization’ [...] not opposed to realism [...] but rather that [...] achieves it surpassingly in a poetical reordering of the world”.⁹⁴ The concept of supernaturalisation does not imply an idea of going beyond reality in order to explore overtly unreal dimensions, but rather points to a sharper observation of what lies behind the simple surface of things, while still belonging to reality. Ideally following Robert Bresson’s idea that “the

⁸⁹ Laffay, *Logique du cinéma*, 34.

⁹⁰ Personal communication with Jia Zhangke (Beijing, 3 April 2012).

⁹¹ Zhang, “My Camera Doesn’t Lie?” 28-29.

⁹² McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 134.

⁹³ Lagesse, “‘Still Life’ de Jia Zhang-ke,” 81.

⁹⁴ Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume 2*, 89.

supernatural in film is only the real rendered more precise,”⁹⁵ supernaturalisation, implies a different order of analysis, superimposed on the material and the mimetic level. In aesthetic terms, and with more specific reference to the post-*jishizhuyi* practice, it translates into a series of transgressive features that depart from canonical versions of realism to redefine the field without negating its central assumption: the director’s ‘realistic motivation’ of giving account of the real. Accordingly, this process parallels that of allogenesi in their shared creative effort to transform a given object into something alien to itself to finally expose its multiple transformative meanings.

As the following chapters will explain in detail, this process of allogenic supernaturalisation has profoundly affected the standard *jishizhuyi*. Whilst still rooting in it a formal foundation to some extent, the evolving practice has produced a number of transgressive detours, including fragmented and alien-ating temporalities, magical elements, the implosion of reality within fictional constructions (and vice versa), and paradoxical examples of trans-historical documentary. However the depiction of these “supernaturalised” realities is not reduced to a mere aesthetic artifice, but rather acts as a functional filter through which the cinematic creation unfolds – an additional maker of meaning. As for Bazin “there is no reason why a ghost should not occupy an exact place in space”;⁹⁶ therefore these supernaturalised features represent one possible effective way to approach the absurdity of contemporary times and grasp the meaning of the era. In this respect, Esther Cheung notices that, in critical historical moments, filmmakers tend to resort to subjective cinematic solutions to face the instability and uncertainty of the epoch in which they live. As she argues further, their practice can eventually develop a tendency towards the ghostly and the surreal.⁹⁷ To further justify the coherence of such a trend in postsocialist China, I would maintain that it is precisely in the interpretive gap created by the country’s postsocialist specificity – a postmodern condition of “spatial fracturing and temporal desynchronization”⁹⁸ – that the allogenic transgressions can actually develop. This aesthetically transgressive component, in fact, makes realism a more flexible tool to describe the contradictions of contemporary China, its relentless impulse towards the future, nostalgic re-appropriation of the discredited past, social and economic inequality, and overall cultural changes. To put it differently, simply exposing a recording medium to raw everyday occurrences might not be enough to understand the complexity of the country’s present condition. Since the implementation of the economic reforms in the 1980s and among the pressing tides of globalisation, China has undergone a series of shocking transformations

⁹⁵ Cited in Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 62.

⁹⁶ Bazin, “The Life and Death of Superimposition.”

⁹⁷ Cheung, “Realisms within Conundrum,” 14. Cheung makes the same argument also with reference to Hong Kong cinema in her “On Spectral Mutations.”

⁹⁸ Dirlik and Zhang, “Introduction,” 3.

compressed into the shortest timespan. A period of only thirty years has witnessed not only the drastic change in the country's economic asset, but also dramatic social changes, including unprecedented class imbalances, that have left people disoriented. In this kaleidoscopic process, what has been lost may just be the sense of reality itself. As a category aiming to offer an effective description of reality, realism is thus directly challenged by such diverging perspectives. As for the realist director, the pressing questions are: what is the real appearance of a world that continually changes? And how can it be grasped? In order to portray the factual reality, what post-*jishizhuyi* filmmakers choose to show is not (only) a list of material details, but rather a set of feelings, question marks, and sensorial stimulations, which convey a sense of confusion, alienation, and incomprehensibility that are the director's own as well as the viewer's. Given the impossibility of a comprehensive vision of the real, which seems to be historically unattainable nowadays, reality is then re-imagined in response to an environment that relentlessly redefines itself without reaching any concrete form. In this respect, the transgressive allogenic variants of *jishizhuyi* become meaningful within the contemporary Chinese context, as they prove able to account for the postsocialist contradictions without undermining the truth-value of realism.⁹⁹

Historical crises are closely correlated to shifting representational strategies and technological innovations too. Raymond Williams argues that technological changes are "directly linked with a sense of crisis in the relationship of art to society, or in the very purposes of art which had been previously agreed or even taken for granted".¹⁰⁰ Since the turn of the twenty-first century DV cameras have been increasingly chosen as the technological medium *par excellence* for Chinese realist filmmaking. Lightweight, low cost, and user-friendly, DV cameras also owe their success to the degree of intimacy that their non-intrusive approach can preserve between the filmmaker and the actors.¹⁰¹ Wang Yiman further comments on the DV

⁹⁹ A similar (or complementary) argument can also be made with reference to other (non-realist) cinematic practices in contemporary Chinese cinema. For instance, mainstream commercial filmmaking, and in particular the blooming of *wuxia* films, represents a case in point. Unlike the art-house scale and ambiguous subtext of the films considered in the present dissertation, the commercial *dapian* ('big pictures') are specifically conceived to ensure high box office returns as well as to convey nationalist feelings. However, interestingly enough, one can see how they in fact display another kind of cinematic 'magic' to control the instability of the postsocialist condition, namely, the creation of mythical phantasmagorias and a culturally essentialised past.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 163.

¹⁰¹ In their analysis of digital cinema, Ganz and Khatib especially stress the shifting spatial relationships between the director and the actors under the new medium, namely, the implosion of spatial boundaries between the parties, which offer "a moment of liberation or rather a series of liberations" from conventional cinematic modes. By carrying out analyses of Thomas Vinterberg's Dogme film *Festen* and Lars von Trier's *Dogville*, the two scholars highlight how "the actors are free to move in space [...] The elision of the boundaries between the space in front and behind the camera means that the actors participate in the making of the film in a different way." In fact, "digital camera does not forget. It sees everything and it records everything" and it is for this reason that "the boundaries between the actor as a person and the actor in the performance become less clear". The blurring line between the camera and the actors has consequences for the audience too, as the viewer now "inhabits the same dramatic space

camera's capacity to record "social experiences that are still in process" in the form of "ostensibly inconsequential real-life details, as perceived and experienced, yet not systematized, by the amateur-author".¹⁰² If this is true for *jishizhuyi* filmmaking of the 1990s, the later use of DV technology signals instead "a transition from an age of mechanical reproduction to an era of digital art,"¹⁰³ in the sense that "DV can change a director into a painter, a poet, always ready to jot down flitting thoughts and inspirations".¹⁰⁴ The increasing adoption of DV technology since the turn of the twenty-first century, in fact, goes hand in hand with a growing tendency towards aestheticisation. However, the 'reality effect' and authenticity value of the digital practice in Chinese contemporary cinema should be contextualised, once again, against the specificities of China's post-national condition. The production of digital images has generated contrasting debates in China and the West. For Chinese filmmakers, DV technology embodies the democratic chance of more direct access to reality, the possibility of one-person filmmaking, and an enhanced social commitment towards the documentation of contemporary China outside of state control.¹⁰⁵ Conversely, for Western critics, the DV image lessens the documentary value of the work as the traceless post-production modifications made possible by this technology "destroy the photographic image as evidence of anything except the process of digitalization".¹⁰⁶ Reflecting on these concurrent conflicting visions on a transnational scale, Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel point out that "this alternative appropriation of DV in the People's Republic should alert us to the fact that DV has no single essence, but already means different things in different places according to local circumstances".

Hence I suggest contextualising the use of DV technology even more precisely within our field of reference. In this respect, I contend that the significance of the DV practice in this allo-genetically-altered realism lies at the intersection of two complementary drives: on the one hand, a documentary-inspired realistic motivation aiming to faithfully describe reality; and, on the other hand, the possibility of physical intervention in the recorded reality, in the name of a creative aestheticisation that points to expressing additional meanings beyond the indexical value of the image itself. The encounter between these two visions generates estranging aesthetic solutions. Commenting on the transgressive detours in the cinema of Jia Zhangke (which I will tackle too in the following chapters), Ester Cheung maintains that "Jia's adoption of

with apparently the same privileges as the actors and the filmmakers". Ganz and Khatib, "Digital Cinema," 21-27.

¹⁰² Wang, "The Amateur's Lightning Rod," 23.

¹⁰³ Cheung, "Realisms within Conundrum," 13.

¹⁰⁴ Jia Zhangke cited in Wang, "The Amateur's Lightning Rod," 19.

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of DV technology in the context of Chinese cinema, see Chen, *Yingxiang dangdai Zhongguo*, 162-70; and Berry and Rofel, "Introduction," 8-10.

¹⁰⁶ Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 259. Lev Manovich further comments on the manipulative potential of DV technology by claiming that, instead of a celebration of the indexical power of the medium, DV image signals a return to conventional figurative arts. See Manovich, *The Language of New Media*.

the techniques of defamiliarisation provides an avenue for viewers to get in touch with reality” and more precisely his camera “records and makes strange at the same time to produce a visual hermeneutics of China’s contemporary reality”.¹⁰⁷ By describing the functioning of a camera that simultaneously “records and makes strange,” Cheung hits the mark in accounting for the purpose of this renewed style. To better understand this cinematic effect, I suggest connecting transversently the post-*jishizhuyi* practice with Paul Schrader’s concept of ‘transcendental style’. By focusing on the works of Ozu Yasujiro, Robert Bresson, and Carl Theodor Dreyer, Schrader describes a film style in which, on the one hand, realism remains on the surface to visually anchor the viewer’s experience to the everyday real, while, on the other, simultaneously transcends materiality and mimesis onto a spiritual, otherworldly dimension. In other words, whilst mimetic realism, significantly, still represents a central concern as it embodies a sense of authenticity of the represented world, Schrader’s proposition primarily aims to expose a spiritual truth expressed through formal aestheticisation. Stasis privileged over action, restrained quotidian emotions over dramatic spectacles, the use of non-professional actors, a preference for natural sounds and on-location shootings – all of these elements contribute to shape a transcendental realism that points to existential rather than psychological depth.¹⁰⁸ Discussing the transcendental style with reference to contemporary Chinese cinema, Gina Marchetti argues that it is in the encounter between this cinematic vision and the immanent attitude of Italian Neorealism that another kind of cinematic realism can be conceived in the Chinese context.¹⁰⁹ However, also in light of the previous discussion on *xianchang* and (the impossibility of) transcendence, the exact purchase of this latter notion in the context of contemporary Chinese cinema should be further delineated. One film that, following Schrader’s analysis, best exemplifies transcendental realism is Bresson’s classic *Pickpocket* (1959), the story of a petty thief who, after many vicissitudes, is arrested but finally enjoys spiritual redemption by discovering the power of love. In Bresson’s terms, transcendence is a matter of spiritual holiness, a movement from the bottom up. However, in the Chinese case, set aside any idea of Western holiness, transcendence has to be understood as a movement towards the inside. It is the search for a meaning, but not an omni-comprehensive one to be pursued by means of linear grand narratives aspiring to a central point of closure. Transcendence, in this particular context, represents a single glimmer of truth, not necessarily ontological, but rather subjective and emotional, and for this reason even more authentic.

McGrath understands this new realism as drawing on two main sources: on the one hand, the *jishizhuyi* tradition, which has developed in China since the early 1990s; and, on the

¹⁰⁷ Cheung, “Realisms within Conundrum,” 17.

¹⁰⁸ See Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*.

¹⁰⁹ Marchetti, “Bicycle Thieves and Pickpockets in the ‘Desert of the Real’,” 69.

other hand, the trend of international art cinema prominent in the film festival circuit, which is loosely defined by a reliance on aestheticised long takes. Accordingly, post-*jishizhuyi* practices represent an active intervention both in a specifically Chinese discourse and a transnational one, at the same time.¹¹⁰ Besides McGrath's consistent proposition, I suggest considering another link that transversently informs the practice of supernaturalised realism in contemporary Chinese cinema. Since the inception of *jishizhuyi* filmmaking, Chinese realist directors have unanimously distanced themselves from the cinematic standard of the Fifth Generation. However, more than one contact point can be detected between the two practices. In this respect, Lou Ye's words prove inspiring:

I remember Wang Xiaoshuai said to me: 'I absolutely won't be influenced by the Fifth Generation [directors]'. I replied that this claim itself reflected the influence of the Fifth Generation directors, because if you say 'I am not the same as him,' you in fact have some relationship with him [...] It is impossible, therefore, to completely dismiss the influence of the Fifth Generation directors.¹¹¹

Chris Berry argues that post-*jishizhuyi* films, by invoking a larger interpretive framework than *jishizhuyi*'s limited historical vision, connect with the Fifth Generation, in that both practices take a despairing look back at the failure of the modernity project.¹¹² Focusing on stylistic matters, I contend that the two cinematic trends are further linked through a shared disbelief that reality can be grasped 'as it is'. Both the Fifth Generation and the post-*jishizhuyi* practices highlight the passage, or rupture, from the act of 'presenting' (the ideological truth of socialist realism or the *jishizhuyi*'s contingent vision) to the act of 're-presenting', which implies the creative use of aesthetics to stamp a subjective mark on the cinematic creation. Commenting on the allegorical and (a-)historical settings of Fifth Generation films, Zhang Xudong argues that their visual style "is realised through an encounter with the present prepared by an aesthetic estrangement".¹¹³ As mentioned above, the insisted reliance on visual aestheticisms in post-*jishizhuyi* works combines to shape a similar feeling of estrangement through the adoption of transgressive stylistic elements.

Zhu Yin also highlights that "the Fifth Generation did not begin with a clear articulation of a particular stylistic aspiration" so at first it expressed a "contingent self-positioning instead

¹¹⁰ McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 130-31. McGrath makes his argument with specific reference to Jia Zhangke's cinema; however I find it pertinent to extend its relevance to the overall context.

¹¹¹ Cited in Sun and Xun, *Lights! Camera! Kai Shi!*, 47.

¹¹² Berry, "Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Postsocialist Chinese Cinema," 125-26.

¹¹³ Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, 249-50.

of a predefined cinematic vision [and this accordingly] made its early films a stylistic pastiche".¹¹⁴ The propositions enunciated by Marchetti (transcendental style plus Italian Neorealism) and McGrath (*jishizhuyi* plus international art-house cinema), and my references to both the residuals of left-wing cinema and Fifth Generation aestheticisms, imply a similar transvergent connotation for contemporary Chinese realism, namely, a stylistic hybridisation occurring through non-linear spatial and temporal lines that ideally sustains the formation of an allogenic style. However, the use of the term *pastiche* should be better justified. In postmodern Jamesonian terms, *pastiche* denotes the "random cannibalization of all the style of the past, the play of random stylistic allusions" leading to a fundamental void of meaning.¹¹⁵ McGrath, for his part, defines a new trend in contemporary Chinese filmmaking that he names 'new formalism'. In general terms, formalism signals the independence of form from narrative content and, for this reason, is traditionally opposed to cinematic realism. The scholar understands this issue in negative terms, not as "a moment of modernist autonomy or critique, but rather an embodiment of the ideology of capitalism, insofar as form itself appears as a globalised commodity".¹¹⁶ In line with Jameson's appraisal, McGrath thus describes this particular stylistic construction "as a detachable and transferable commodity under global capitalism", that is, a mere aesthetic adornment sharable by multiple transnational players due to its empty signification.¹¹⁷ As an example of this attitude, the scholar mentions Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*, which he understands in terms of Kristin Thompson's theorisation of cinematic excess. As the symptom of a film's insufficient narrative or thematic motivation, cinematic excess refers to all of those elements in a film that exceed narrative logics and distract the viewer's attention towards a formal apparatus that eludes interpretation.¹¹⁸ However, such a critical construction looks limiting and unable to address meanings eventually produced on a more sophisticated level. To soften the rigidity of the proposition, I suggest returning to classic film theory once again, and more specifically to Galvano Della Volpe's concept of filmic verisimilitude, which he defines as "the foundation of the artistic construction of the film image".¹¹⁹ When, during the process of film viewing, we are confronted with elements that exceed narrative motivations and that, for some reason, disturb our viewing experience, Della Volpe suggests that this is not so much due to a flawed mimetic rendering of reality. Rather, this feeling is given by the perception that that particular feature is somehow not consistent with the director's overall subjective stance. Accordingly, even the most transgressive or aestheticised detail can prove its

¹¹⁴ Zhu Yin, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reforms*, 54.

¹¹⁵ Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 65-66.

¹¹⁶ McGrath, "The New Formalism," 208.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹¹⁸ Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess."

¹¹⁹ Della Volpe, *Il verosimile filmico ed altri scritti di estetica*, 74

realist authenticity as long as it roots coherently in the filmmaker's subjective vision of the world. Therefore, in light of my positive argument for postsocialist pluralisation in chapter 2, and following the above discussions on the concepts of the feeling of the real and supernaturalisation, I suggest considering this aesthetic excess in more productive terms. In other words, and as the following analytical chapters will hopefully demonstrate, I argue that the formal apparatus of a given film can effectively function as a generator of meaning itself.

This chapter attempted to overcome conventional readings of *jishizhuyi* by focusing in particular on its aesthetic practice rather than taking for granted its professed stances of film poetics. By critically questioning its claim of spontaneity and objectivity, and by building analytical (non-linear) parallels with a number of cultural practices, the discussion unearthed a series of contradictory drives that significantly inform the style. This inherent variety testifies both to the aesthetic complexity of *jishizhuyi* and its tendency to evolve into new derivative forms in a process of continuous allogenesis. Allogenic post-*jishizhuyi* aesthetic practices thus sustain a fundamental tension between the documentation of life 'as it is' and a creative re-interpretation of reality re-imagined via aesthetic means. The encounter between these two realist motivations produces, on the one hand, a sense of estrangement while, on the other, combines to surpass the limitations of a mimetic rendering of reality. To put it differently, although bearing witness to the condition of contemporary China remains the central concern of realist filmmakers, their final purpose now is to reveal an emotional and spiritual truth that stretches beyond the constraints of materialist descriptions. To decode a seemingly unreadable reality caught in the turmoil of fast-paced transformations, realist authenticity no longer equates assumptions of objectivity and spontaneity, but rather coincides with the director's own sensitivity. Objectivity is thus replaced by a 'feeling of the real' and spontaneity by a process of Bazinian 'supernaturalization' as creative aestheticisation embodies a formal act that updates the cinematic approach to the real and generates additional meaning.

The following chapters present a number of case studies that provide evidence for the arguments hitherto discussed. More specifically, each chapter focuses on a specific trend that has recently emerged in Chinese realist cinema and shows a distinctive aesthetic transgression that has developed as part of the allogenic mutations of the *jishizhuyi* style. Hence chapter 4 discusses the adoption of estranging atmospheres and supernatural elements within otherwise quasi-documentary accounts, while chapter 5 engages with the deliberate interplay of fiction and nonfiction. As the method of transvergence encourages the creation of a rich theoretical network, both chapters begin by introducing with critical debates that prove helpful to better substantiate my arguments. In particular, chapter 4 deals with theories of magic and magical

realism, and chapter 5 with issues of documentary performativity and documentary theory in general.

CHAPTER 4

THE WILDEST THINGS

“That’s how my grandmother used to tell stories,
the wildest things with a completely natural tone of voice”
(Gabriel García Márquez in Bell-Villada, *García Márquez*, 71)

The expression of a subjective feeling of the real and the increasing tendency towards aestheticisation in post-*jishizhuyi* cinema are further investigated in the present chapter through the close reading of a number of relevant case studies. In particular, among the various allogetic detours, chapter 4 focuses on the adoption of magic(al) features, ranging from alienating atmospheres to supernatural elements, within otherwise quasi-documentary accounts on reality.¹ To investigate the main characteristics of this aesthetic transgression, I will critically apply the theories of magic(al) realism to the field of film studies, and will consider their relevance in the specific context of contemporary Chinese cinema. Magic(al) realism, in its various theorisations, has been principally applied to literature, and only occasionally to film. As the following discussion will show, the standard use of the term, often in non-academic contexts, betrays a certain randomness and lack of a firm theoretical substance. Moreover, its conventional understanding within postcolonial frameworks further limits a broader and more fluid exploration of its analytical potential. Hence the following analysis aims to detach it from narrowly localised and folkloristic uses, and see how it can be applied to a multiplicity of contexts.

How does magic(al) realism affect the conventional understanding of the cinematic medium and film realism? What does its Chinese cinematic variant suggest about magic(al) realism as a representational mode? How does it take part in the process of transformation, creative pluralisation, and global interconnection expressed by the condition of an unfinished postsocialism? What does its emergence indicate about the identity of postsocialist China? To address these questions, the discussion first attempts to systematise the use of magic and magical realism in the field of film studies; thus the chapter painstakingly discusses four case studies in which the allogetic development of *jishizhuyi* into a specific kind of magical realist

¹ Following Maggie Ann Bower’s suggestion, the form ‘magic(al) realism’ is adopted whenever the object of my analysis entails aspects of both magic and magical (if not even marvellous) realism. The theoretical distinction between magic, marvellous, and magical realism will be explained below, still based on the discussion offered by Bowers. See Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*. I also wish to point out that such a terminological distinction is sustainable in English, but not in other languages as, for instance, the French only use *magique*, the Italian *magico*, and the Spanish *mágico*.

filmmaking proves especially relevant: Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*, Andrew Cheng's diptych *Shanghai Panic* and *Welcome to Destination Shanghai*, and Jia Zhangke's *The World* and *Still Life*.

1. MAGIC(AL) JISHIZHUYI

1.1 THEORIES OF MAGIC(AL) REALISM

Magic(al) realism is a slippery notion as it presents the oxymoronic juxtaposition of two contrasting wor(l)ds: magic and reality. Different articulations of the relationship between these two discursive spheres have generated different theorisations, each one bearing its own terminological specificity: magic realism, marvellous realism and magical realism.

The term 'magic realism' (*Magischer Realismus*) was first introduced by the German art critic Franz Roh (1890-1965) in his 1925 book *Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Painting* (*Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei*). By considering the works of painters like Otto Dix, Max Ernst, Alexander Kanoldt, George Grosz and Georg Schrimpf, all of whom worked during the Weimar Republic (1919-33), Roh addresses the 'New Objectivity' (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), namely, a novel artistic current whose magic realist style is intended as a reaction against the abstract tendencies of the previous Expressionist wave. Careful attention to detail, the photographic quality of the image, and the representation of the non-material side of reality are the main features of this style. Roh in particular highlights the "integrative attitude" of magic realism, aiming to provide a new vision of the everyday world by combining a sober matter-of-factness with an investigation of the spiritual undertones of reality.² In Roh's own words: "With the word 'magic' [...] I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it".³ The purpose of magic realism is thus to uncover the inner life of things beyond the accurate rendering of their external details, within an overall artistic effort that stresses the creative agency of the (realist) painter to finally understand the works of art "not like copies of nature but like another creation".⁴ The magic realist proposition can then be better understood if contextualised within the artistic and scientific achievements of its time. On the one hand, magic realist painters were strongly influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, although their translation of psychoanalytical theories into their

² Roh, "Magic Realism," 19.

³ Ibid., 16.

⁴ Ibid., 23.

painting did not follow in the same cerebral fashion as that of the Surrealists.⁵ On the other hand, the painting of Giorgio De Chirico and Italian metaphysical art in general constituted another major point of reference, especially for their “evocation of *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness, eeriness), clarity of colour, precision and ordering, the use of sharp contrasts, and the ability to make ‘the real appear unreal, the unreal real’.”⁶ To name but a few examples generally understood within Roh’s idea of magic realism, Otto Dix’s *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (*Bildnis der Journalistin Sylvia von Harden*, 1926) combines realistic details and disproportionate physical features to emphasise the turmoil of the Weimar era through the spiritual condition of its female subject; George Schrimpf’s *Landscape in the Bavarian Forest* (*Miesbacher Landschaft*, 1933) conveys the magic through an exaggeration of realistic details, that is, the painting’s sharp focus on the microscopic details of the representation let “the viewers access [...] more realistic details than their own eye would provide in one glance”.⁷

Roh’s analysis deals exclusively with painting and quickly dismisses the literary question by stating that there are only two kinds of literature, that in the style of Arthur Rimbaud and that in the style of Émile Zola.⁸ However, due to the flexibility of the notions of ‘magic’ and ‘reality’, magic realism was soon adopted by the literary community, although whether it refers to a mode, a genre, or a cultural concept in this field, is still a source of debate among critics.⁹ Its dissemination in the literary field first took place in Latin America, where the concept has been consistently appropriated and accordingly transformed. To justify this specific geo-cultural connotation, Irene Guenther mentions two main factors: on the one hand, the 1927 publication of Roh’s study in *Revista de Occidente*, a Spanish journal edited by the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset and distributed both in Europe and Latin America; and, on the other hand, the massive migration of intellectuals fleeing from wartime Europe to America in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰ The key figure in this process was the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1904-80), who lived in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s, and became acquainted with the European artistic movements of the era. During this time, he saw the works of the Surrealists but, while agreeing on the necessity for art to address the non-material aspects of reality, he dismissed their artistic proposition as just a series of “improbable juxtapositions”.¹¹ He was familiar with Roh’s ideas too, and drew inspiration from them. However, back in his native Cuba, Carpentier attacked Roh’s “tiresome

⁵ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 10-13.

⁶ Guenther, “Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic,” 38-39. The quotation within the quotation is taken from James Thrall Soby, *Giorgio De Chirico*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955, pag. 25.

⁷ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 117.

⁸ Guenther, “Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic,” 57.

⁹ Bowers argues that, in practice, magic realism hardly crystallises in a unified genre, hence it can be better understood as a narrative mode. Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 3.

¹⁰ Guenther, “Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic,” 31.

¹¹ Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America,” 75.

pretension of creating the marvellous” and, in the prologue to his 1949 novel *The Kingdom of This World* (*El reino de este mundo*), he attempts to overcome this supposed artificiality by proposing his notion of ‘marvellous realism’ (*lo real maravilloso*).¹² The concept aims to highlight the marvel arising from “the mixture of differing cultural systems and the variety of experiences [typical of Latin America] that create an extraordinary atmosphere,” an environment in which everyday matters and supernatural events inspired by the local folklore naturally coexist.¹³ As Fredric Jameson points out, this is “not a realism to be transfigured by the ‘supplement’ of a magical perspective but a reality which is already in and of itself magical”.¹⁴ In this, Carpentier and Roh share a fundamental vision, although the penchant of marvellous realism for the representation of the supernatural does not find an equivalent in the magic realist aesthetics. Moreover, whilst magic realism entails a critical stance in its approach to reality, marvellous realism instead emerges from and accordingly conveys a more optimistic understanding of its surrounding environment. To a certain extent, this distinctive attitude can be attributed to Carpentier’s position as an ‘enthusiastic outsider’: he was a man educated in European culture who went back to his home country after two decades abroad, and showed his amazement at the more colourful, vibrant and free context.

In 1955, the Mexican critic Angel Flores (1900-94) published his influential essay *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction* (*El realismo mágico en el cuento hispanoamericano*). In this study Flores does not recognise Carpentier as the first writer to adopt the style in Latin America, but rather dates its introduction back to Jorge Luis Borges and the 1935 publication of his *A Universal History of Infamy* (*Historia universal de la infamia*).¹⁵ In a broader perspective, according to Flores, ‘magical realism’ (*realismo mágico*) has to be understood as a reaction against the photographic realism that became established in European painting and literature in the nineteenth century. Hence magical realism is intended as a direct continuation of the European romantic realist tradition, not only of literature (in which Miguel de Saavedra Cervantes and Franz Kafka are mentioned as major influences), but also of the modernist arts in general (e.g. the Italian painter Giorgio De Chirico, already a major source of inspiration for Roh).¹⁶ The main literary achievements of magical realism historically follow the Cuban revolution of 1959 and the resulting sense of euphoria informing Latin America at the time. Exemplified by works such as Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*, 1967), magical realism presents aspects of both magic and marvellous realism,

¹² Ibid., 84. For a thorough study of Carpentier’s marvellous realism and the works of other Latin American writers connected to this proposition, see Angulo, *Magic Realism*.

¹³ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 14-15.

¹⁴ Jameson, “On Magical Realism in Film,” 311.

¹⁵ Flores, “Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction,” 113.

¹⁶ Ibid., 111-12.

combining the precision of the former with the vitality of the latter to provide a “matter-of-fact depiction of magical happenings”.¹⁷ In other words, magical realism points to the creation of a world where “the realism of the real is permeated by magic just as the world of the magical is underpinned by the real”.¹⁸

Flores’ proposition has attracted criticism as well, in particular with regard to its chronological issues and sources of inspiration.¹⁹ Some critics have also expressed doubts regarding the notion of magic(al) realism itself since they feel the term has “neither the specificity nor the theoretical foundation to be [...] useful”.²⁰ To overcome this critical impasse, I suggest re-positioning magic(al) realism in a broader (yet not more generic) discursive context. In other words, I suggest that the pretension of the style’s specifically Latin American character is a narrow viewpoint that prevents a more fluid appropriation of the concept. By criticising magic realism as a sterile set of techniques disconnected from the larger European cultural context, Carpentier was the first to claim that Latin America was the natural environment for the style.²¹ However, scholars have questioned Carpentier’s exclusive use of the term as a marketing strategy meant to enhance the status of Latin America in the world literary market.²² Due to its “intrinsic heterogeneity,”²³ magic(al) realism cannot be considered as specific to one single culture and, as a matter of fact, it has progressively spread to different cultural contexts all over the world. Testifying to this condition, in 1990 Homi Bhabha defined it as “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world”.²⁴ On the same lines, Stephen Slemon illustrates how it effectively expresses the main narrative concerns of postcolonial literature: the double perspective of both the colonised and the colonisers, the recovery of forgotten voices and histories, the articulation of cultural tensions and representational gaps.²⁵ However, the understanding of magic(al) realism within the postcolonial discourse raises some other critical problems, such as the supposed repetition of a colonial perspective that opposes the primitive and irrational spirit of the colonised with the enlightened and rational world of the colonisers.²⁶ In addition to this, I see another limitation already entailed in Bhabha’s previous statement, as it identifies magic(al) realism again as particular only to a certain part of the world, that is, those

¹⁷ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 18.

¹⁸ Hart and Ouyang, “Globalization of Magical Realism,” 4.

¹⁹ Angulo, *Magic Realism*, 6-8.

²⁰ González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier*, 111-12.

²¹ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 90.

²² Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, 131.

²³ Hart and Ouyang, “Globalization of Magical Realism,” 11.

²⁴ Bhabha, “Introduction,” 7.

²⁵ Slemon, “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse.”

²⁶ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 121-26. For postcolonial readings of magical realism, see Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*; Connell, “Discarding Magical Realism”; and Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*.

regions affected by the process of colonisation. This reading in fact inhibits a wider understanding of magic(al) realism in non-postcolonial contexts, whether these are semi-postcolonial (like China) or former colonising countries (like the United Kingdom), not to mention the logic of neo-colonialism in the era of globalisation.

To prove the wider applicability of the concept, I find it useful to read it instead within the prescriptions of postmodernism. As demonstrated in chapter 2, postmodernism identifies a flexible framework that is able to adapt to different historical-cultural contexts. In this case, it allows for escaping the limitations of the postcolonial analysis and investigating the topic from new fruitful perspectives. Interestingly, Jean-François Lyotard argues that the crucial point of postmodernism is that it “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” and this almost sounds like an unintentional description of the magic(al) realist mode.²⁷ Moreover, the main features of postmodernism – metafiction, repetition, metamorphosis, the erasure of boundaries, multiple perspectives, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, and *pastiche* – significantly parallel the characteristics of magical realist narratives.²⁸ From this perspective, a rich corpus of works produced in different cultural locations proves magic(al) realism’s extensive relevance in contemporary world literature, not as the singular cultural expression of a particular region, but rather as a flexible transnational mode that can be appropriated under a plurality of circumstances to express a variety of concerns. Works as diverse as Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, 1979), Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) share the main features of magic(al) realist fiction: detailed descriptions of the phenomenal world combined with magical elements that cannot be explained according to physical laws; fluid boundaries between diverging realms (real and magic, life and death, fact and fiction); a pluralistic vision of the world that challenges received ideas of time, space and identity; a tendency towards hyperbole and excess; and a recurrent emphasis on social and political concerns.²⁹ Seen as a multi-faceted yet coherent whole, this group of works testifies to magical realism’s potential to voice spiritual truths that cannot easily be articulated by means of rational words or images.

Besides these descriptive features, the core point of magic(al) realist texts of any sort lies in the distinctive interaction between the magic and the real, namely, what I would call the obviousness of the magic. This passage from Flores’ analysis of Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*, 1915) provides a helpful clue in this regard:

²⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

²⁸ For postmodern readings of magical realism, see Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children” and D’Haen, “Magic Realism and Postmodernism.”

²⁹ Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children,” 167-74.

The transformation of Gregor Samsa into a cockroach or bedbug (Kafka uses the imprecise 'monstrous vermin') is not a matter of conjecture or discussion: it happened and it was accepted by the other characters as an almost normal event. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision.³⁰

The extraordinary has to be regarded as an ordinary occurrence, "admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing. It is a simple matter of the most complicated sort".³¹ Hence whether it refers to the mystery of life as in Roh's theorisation, or instead points to extraordinary occurrences as in marvellous and magical realist texts, magic is never an artificial trick "as it is found in a magic show".³² On the contrary, magic is obvious, natural and inherent in our everyday reality. The obviousness of the magic is also a key discriminating factor that distinguishes magic(al) realism from similar narrative modes. The dissimilarity with fantastic literature is a first case in point: unlike the magical matter-of-factness of magic(al) realism, the fantastic narrative presents the extraordinary as problematic and, as it points to disconcert the reader, accordingly expresses hesitation towards its occurrence.³³ As for Surrealism, both modes oppose established realist forms to investigate the non-naturalistic sides of life, but magic(al) realism excludes the kind of sub-conscious hallucinations that are typical of the surrealist art: while Surrealism focuses more specifically on the psychological dimension of the mind and its imagination, magic(al) realism points instead to a spiritual exploration of material reality.³⁴ Finally, distinctions should also be drawn with reference to science fiction, whose use of unrealistic settings and recourse to rational explanations differs from the invocation of an obviousness of the magic; and to allegorical writing as well, in which the alternative meaning

³⁰ Flores, "Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction," 115. Original emphasis. The identification of Kafka as a magical realist writer is a controversial topic among scholars. Angel Flores and Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, for instance, include Kafka, and more specifically *The Metamorphosis*, in the category due to the matter-of-factness of the description of Gregor Samsa's transformation into a vermin (see Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*; and Flores, "Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction"). Conversely, Maggie Ann Bowers sees the killing of Samsa by his own relatives as the "family's rejection of the extraordinariness", and thus argues that "the text cannot be called magical realist". Moreover, Bower applies a temporal standard: since the book was written in 1915, at least ten years before Roh's theorisation, it cannot strictly be considered an example of magical realism, but rather of allegoric writing (see Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 26-27). Unlike Bower's rigid analytical stance, it is common to find magical realism used retrospectively to address texts such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* or *The One Thousand and One Nights*.

³¹ Parkinson Zamora and Faris, "Introduction," 3.

³² Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 21.

³³ Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, 25; Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 25-26.

³⁴ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 23-25.

superimposed on the extraordinary event is hierarchically more significant than the fact itself and its magical obviousness.³⁵

It is also interesting to notice how magic(al) realism in fact defines a rhizomatic structure that works transversally to express its potential. As suggested by the argument of the obviousness of the magic, magic(al) realism is fundamentally anti-hierarchical in its refusal to arrange its two main components, the magic and the real, into any kind of rational order.³⁶ Moreover, it is de-centred and anti-hegemonic in its essence as it not only “signif[ies] resistance to monumental theories of literary practice,”³⁷ but also, unlike the singular, objective and universal vision of standard realism, it works “less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interaction of diversity.”³⁸ In this sense, magic(al) realism is also multi-directional and operates a fundamental synthesis between its diverging constitutive elements. Hence, according to Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, it should not be seen as a disruptive narrative mode, but rather as a tolerant and inclusive one.³⁹ Finally, Bowers makes an especially relevant remark as she argues that “by breaking down the notion of an absolute truth and a singular version of reality, magical realism allows for the possibility of many truths to exist simultaneously.”⁴⁰ By combining this plural(izing) aspect of magic(al) realism with the same attitude described with reference to Chinese postsocialism, we can thus testify to its distinctive relevance within our specific context of reference as well.

1.2 MAGIC(AL) REALISM IN CHINA

To what extent can mainland China be included in the discourse of magical realism? One could argue that the Search-for-Roots movement (or Root-seeking literature) of the mid-1980s shares some distinctive elements with magical realism. The Search-for-Roots movement is a literary movement that dominated Chinese fiction between approximately 1985 and 1988.⁴¹ This wave

³⁵ Ibid., 26-31.

³⁶ Cf. Slemon, “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse,” 410.

³⁷ Ibid., 408.

³⁸ Parkinson Zamora and Faris, “Introduction,” 3.

³⁹ Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, 30.

⁴⁰ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 71.

⁴¹ Root-seeking literature follows the scar literature (*shanghen wenxue*) of the late 1970s, and the literature of reflection (*fansi wenxue*) and reform literature (*gaige wenxue*) of the early 1980s. Its foundation is conventionally dated back to December 1984 when, during a meeting held in Hangzhou and entitled *New Period Literature: Review and Predictions* (*Xin shiqi wenxue: huigu yu yuce*), a group of young writers discarded the previous literary tenets and created a platform for new expressive concerns. Root-seeking literature appeared simultaneously with the modernist wave (*xiandai wenxue*) but soon lost momentum by 1987-88 with the rise of avant-garde or experimental literature (*shiyan wenxue*). Leenhouts, *Leaving the World to Enter the World*, 1-6.

includes authors such as A Cheng, Mo Yan, Jia Pingwa and Tashi Dawa, and Han Shaogong's essay "Literary Roots" ("Wenxue de gen", 1985) is largely considered to be its manifesto. These authors aim to rediscover an original Chinese cultural identity by opposing both the tenets of socialist realism and the iconoclasm of the May Fourth tradition that dismissed the national literary heritage to pursue Western models. In order to find these aesthetic, cultural, anti-hegemonic and non-orthodox roots, the writers venture out into the vast Chinese countryside, where many of them were sent to spend their formative years during the Cultural Revolution.⁴² In this sense, Root-seeking and Latin American magical realist literature share a fundamental point since, as Roberto Gonzáles Echevarría argues with regard to Carpentier, the latter's "artistic enterprise" also "became a search for origins, the recovery of history and traditions".⁴³ Besides showing a similar penchant for the representation of supernatural facts and atmospheres, these two literary trends more generally approach reality from comparable perspectives. As Leo Lee states, in their retreat to the countryside, the Root-seeking writers appear "like exiles returning home after a long absence, [as] they have found the 'homeland' of their own culture foreign, and the journey to their 'roots' becomes one of increasing 'defamiliarization'".⁴⁴ Hence these authors' fascination with ancestral traditions and ethnic minorities parallels the semi-outsider's perspective previously illustrated with reference to Carpentier.⁴⁵

However, the connection between Root-seeking writers and Latin American magical realists should not be taken for granted. Although Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie offhandedly dismiss the question by contending that in the 1980s "[Chinese] fiction writers imitated García Márquez,"⁴⁶ Search-for-Roots novelists conversely advocate their artistic independence, and have stated that, "China would have its own Márquez if he had not been the first".⁴⁷ The only Latin American influence they are willing to acknowledge is an indirect one. In 1996, Jia Pingwa claimed that he had still not read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but that the book's fame alone had already exerted a significant influence on him and other Chinese writers, as it exemplifies the case of a novelist from a developing country who has gained success all over the world.⁴⁸

⁴² *Leaving the World to Enter the World*, 1-24. In the cinematic field, Search-for-Roots has often been linked to the Fifth Generation due to their shared preference for rural landscape as a space for cultural reflection, as well as the depiction of archaic rituals and a-historical settings. In fact, many Fifth Generation films, as well as several Fourth Generation works, are based on Root-seeking stories.

⁴³ Gonzáles Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier*, 107.

⁴⁴ Lee, "Afterwords," 377.

⁴⁵ A significant case in this regard is that of Tashi Dawa, a Root-seeking writer of Tibetan origin trained outside Tibet. For an analysis linking the work of Tashi Dawa with Carpentier, see Schiaffini-Vedani, *Tashi Dawa*.

⁴⁶ McDougall and Kam, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 335.

⁴⁷ Leenhouts, *Leaving the World to Enter the World*, 13.

⁴⁸ Cited in *ibid.*, 12. One of the first comprehensive studies on magic(al) realism in China is Liu Mingjiu's 1987 volume *Weilaizhuyi, chaoxianshizhuyi, mohuan xianshizhuyi*. As the title indicates, the scholar

Instead, Search-for-Roots writers point to the Chinese literary tradition as their major source of inspiration, quoting in particular the ‘records of anomalies’ (*zhiguai*) of the Six Dynasties period (220-589) and the ‘accounts of the extraordinary’ (*chuanqi*) from the Tang dynasty (618-907).⁴⁹ However, the link with these classic literary forms does not simply amount to a similar focus on supernatural content. Kenneth Dewoskin points out that the development of the *zhiguai* into the later *chuanqi* signified the emancipation from the “traditional restraints of social utility and historiography” in literature to more attention being given to the work’s stylistic qualities.⁵⁰ Similarly, Root-seeking literature disavows the degree of social utility entailed both in socialist realist writing and May Fourth realism to embark upon a brand new aesthetic experience. For its distinctive attention to matters of literary style and its scepticism towards the representational power of language, Li Tuo groups this wave within the counter-realist trend of Chinese literature in the 1980s and traces its foundation back to the early position of the literary journal *Today* (*Jintian*) for which literature must be an aesthetic effort detached from politics.⁵¹

Either derived from Latin America or inspired by indigenous traditions, can we coherently subsume Root-seeking literature under the theoretical umbrella of magic(al) realism? With their faltering between dream, reality and paranoia, Search-for-Roots stories can be better understood in terms of Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of fantastic literature as this theorises a narrative characterised by constant hesitation between belief and non-belief in the supernatural events.⁵² For instance, with regard to Han Shaogong, Mark Leenhouts points out that his writing does not actually stress the marvellous itself, but rather aims to generate a feeling of uncertainty that pushes the reader to question whether the narrated facts are true or not. Accordingly, I argue that this element of doubt contrasts with the obviousness of the magic outlined above and thus prevents a consistent identification of Root-seeking literature as an example of magic(al) realism.

interestingly compares three modernist trends entering China during the Reform Period, namely futurism, surrealism, and magical realism. For a more recent study that investigates issues regarding the influence and reception of magical realism in China, see Zeng, *Mohuan xianshizhuyi zai Zhongguo de yingxiang yu jieshou*.

⁴⁹ Leenhouts, *Leaving the World to Enter the World*, 13.

⁵⁰ Dewoskin, “Six Dynasties Chih-kuai and the Birth of Fiction,” 22-23.

⁵¹ Li, *Talks at the Symposium of Overseas Chinese Writers*. Although Root-seeking novelists generally dismiss May Fourth realism, Leo Lee nonetheless detects the lingering influence of Shen Congwen’s work, whose characteristic brand of regional fiction represented an exception among May Fourth writers. Shen did not focus straightforwardly on contemporary matters, but rather conveyed the images of a pastoral world in lyrical and evocative terms: “If for Shen writing fiction about the ‘native soil’ is an act of nostalgic retrieval and artistic re-presentation, the young writers of the 1980s have replaced Shen’s ‘poetics of imaginary nostalgia’ with a poetics of cultural reinvention”. Lee, “Afterwords,” 377. The expression ‘poetics of imaginary nostalgia’ was coined by David Wang in his study of Shen Congwen. See Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*.

⁵² See Todorov, *The Fantastic*.

In any case, the supernatural features in Root-seeking literature derive from an alienation of the subject with respect to the outside world, an estrangement shaped in the gap between the desire to locate a cultural origin and the ideological disillusionment following the end of Maoism. As illustrated in chapter 2, this alienation is not confined to the 1980s, but rather extends to the present day and becomes one of the defining characteristics of Chinese postsocialism. The occurrence of magical elements in the Chinese cultural production continues, in fact, in the postsocialist age as well. More specifically in film, theoretically consistent examples of magic(al) realism began appearing at the turn of the twenty-first century (as the following case studies will demonstrate). Reasons for attesting postsocialism as a privileged framework for the magic(al) realist aesthetics can be assessed, first of all, historically. In this regard, I suggest a parallel with the spiritual condition of the Weimar Republic that inspired Roh's theorisation of magic realism in the 1920s, as both conditions are "torn between a desire for and simultaneous fear of unconditional modernity, between sober, objective rationality and residues of Expressionist and rationalist irrationalities".⁵³ The demolition of an old world order, the resulting uncertainty regarding the future, and a desire for matter-of-factness continuously frustrated by the insecurities of the larger historical context: despite differing material backgrounds, postsocialist China interestingly presents a similar set of defining questions. As argued in the previous chapter, the coherence of such a specific variant of realism in postsocialist China can be further justified in the specific condition of "spatial fracturing and temporal desynchronization", which constitutes an interpretive gap allowing the development of transgressive aesthetics, including magic(al) realism. Therefore, this is one case in which the pluralising attitude of an unfinished postsocialism effectively prompts the allo-genetic potential of the realist style. By combining matter-of-fact observation and magic(al) components, magic(al) realism can finally prove a flexible tool to address the contradictions of contemporary China and provide a relevant description of the country's current condition.

1.3 MAGIC(AL) REALISM IN CHINESE FILM

Literature and cinema are two different media with the latter prominently emphasising the visual dimension. Accordingly, engaging magic(al) realism in film necessarily requires a distinct approach. Given the oxymoronic nature of the proposition, the main issue at stake should be the following: as seemingly contrasting images coexist on screen, how can we perceive the magic(al) as real in film? In this regard, I suggest considering André Bazin's inspiring remark:

⁵³ Michalski, *New Objectivity*, 13.

The opposition that some like to see between a cinema inclined towards the almost documentary representation of reality and a cinema inclined, through reliance on technique, towards escape from reality into fantasy and the world of dreams, is essentially forced [...] The fantastic in the cinema is possible only because of the irresistible realism of the photographic image. It is the image that can bring us face to face with the unreal, that can introduce the unreal into the world of the visible.⁵⁴

From its very beginning, cinema itself has always been magical (and) realist. Scholars of early Chinese cinema, in particular, have stressed this double dimension by linking the advent of cinema to the advent of modernity in China in the 1920s and 1930s. In a historical period characterised by unprecedented cultural changes, cinema attempted to fulfil modern China's obsession with the investigation of the real. At the same time, the viewer perceived the medium as something (technologically) magical: a mysterious light beam making its way through the darkness and materialising images that appeared to be "cut off from reality".⁵⁵ However, I suggest shifting the perspective from magic(al) realism conceived as an intrinsic quality of the medium to magic(al) realism interpreted as a cinematic style. Whilst still exploiting the technological 'magical' capacity of the medium to screen the impossible, the ultimate aim of magic(al) realism as a style is to present this impossible as perfectly possible. In other words, the strategy of magic(al) realism is preventing images from being perceived as "cut off from reality" and rather presenting them as part of the everyday world. By combining this obviousness of the magic with the specific characteristics of the visual apparatus, we can finally broaden our understanding and use of magic(al) realism beyond literature.

A consistent use of the term in film studies is still limited and often ambiguous. With reference to cinema, the concept is most often employed in non-academic contexts, such as journalism, to define a generic supernatural aura that a given film may possess. Apparently, such use betrays a certain randomness and lack of theoretical substance. "On Magical Realism in Film", Fredric Jameson's seminal account on the topic, still represents one of the few consistent attempts to engage magical realism as a cinematic mode. The scholar most notably underlines how the style invariably emerges in times of drastic socio-economic transformations and is linked on the whole to the idea of historical changes. However, Jameson seems almost to understate his contribution due to the number – "statistically inadequate" – and relevance – "very much dependent on the accidents of personal viewing" – of the works under

⁵⁴ Bazin, "The Life and Death of Superimposition."

⁵⁵ Pang, *The Distorting Mirror*, 177. For a discussion of these arguments, see *ibid.*, 184-208. See also Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*.

consideration.⁵⁶ It is nevertheless interesting to see which three ‘accidental’ titles he addresses in his analysis: the Venezuelan *The House of Water* (*La casa de agua*, Jacobo Penzo, 1983), the Colombian *A Man of Principle* (*Cóndores no entierran todos los días*, Francisco Norden, 1984), and the Polish *Fever* (*Gorączka*, Agnieszka Holland, 1981). Despite the randomness of the selection, Jameson’s choices already disentangle magic(al) realism from a strictly Latin American context. To this day, the most extensive use of magic(al) realism as a critical and descriptive tool in film analysis is possibly presented in Aga Skrodzka’s 2012 volume *Magic Realist Cinema in East Central Europe*. The scope and arguments of this study prove interestingly akin to my investigation. Skrodzka does not see magic realist filmmaking as a well-established tradition in world cinema, but rather as a relatively recent trend that emerged in the troubled post-Wall, post-1989 historical context. The scholar understands the development of the style as a by-product of global political, cultural and economic forces that affect East Central Europe and variously connect with issues of regional identity. However, it is especially in the discourse of the historical (postsocialist) trauma experienced by the region that Skrodzka places her discussion. She further highlights the coexistence of impulses of modernisation and the persistence of pre-modern elements, and this remark ideally sets a parallel with the Chinese postsocialist condition. The main difference between my approach and that suggested by Skrodzka is a methodological one. In her theorisation of magic realism in film, the scholar takes classic film theory as a foundation to be supplemented by the critical methods of literary studies. Conversely, by recognising the origins of magic(al) realism in the figurative arts and literature, my approach seeks to understand how this particular theoretical basis can be translated and enriched in the cinematic field.⁵⁷

However, besides these thorough academic examples, analytical oversimplifications still abound. For instance, Bowers states that magical realist films are generally concerned with “philosophical issues such as the existence of God, the role of fate, and the idea of the self”, but this does not entirely apply to the Chinese films analysed below, which I consider as magic(al) realist.⁵⁸ As Bowers further observes, though, “magic realism and magical realism have as many forms of magic and the magical in them as the number of cultural contexts in which these works are produced throughout the world”.⁵⁹ Hence I argue that Chinese magic(al) realist films rather convey a more urgent, even tangible, sense of historical incomprehensibility towards the

⁵⁶ Jameson, “On Magical Realism in Film,” 310.

⁵⁷ Skrodzka, *Magic Realist Cinema in East Central Europe*, xi-xiii. As such, Skrodzka does not engage in a detailed analysis of Roh’s, Carpentier’s, and Flores’ propositions, but only mentions their theoretical contributions to enrich the discussion of her arguments. In particular, the scholar links Roh’s magic realist vision to the cinema of Béla Tarr, and Carpentier’s marvellous realism to the work of Emir Kusturica.

⁵⁸ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 115.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

surrounding environment, the logic of the everyday, and the progression of history, a short-circuit of human awareness within a net of broken linkages. Classic Latin American magic(al) realist texts describe a reality that, although odd, remains crystal-clear in its peculiarity. Magic(al) realism in China, instead, expresses its distinctive originality as an aesthetic device attempting to make sense of a reality that is perceived as incomprehensible. The use of non-naturalistic, even openly supernatural elements might sound paradoxical in the context of a realist analysis but, as Jian Pu argues, they do not oppose reality and realism, but rather represent one of their possible variations.⁶⁰ Hence, such a pluralising and evolving understanding of realism effectively partakes in the multiple efforts of signification deployed in the era of unfinished postsocialism.

By testifying to his own ‘feeling of the real’, Jia Zhangke substantiates the consistency of magic(al) features within the larger landscape of contemporary China with these words:

I have the impression that a surrealist atmosphere prevails in China today, because the entire society faces an enormous pressure to speed up. As a result, many strange and unimaginable events have occurred in reality. As they say, ‘reality is more exceptional than fiction’. The surrealist elements sound unbelievable to most of us, but they are part of reality.⁶¹

The closeness between the ‘process of supernaturalisation’ described in the previous chapter and the theories of magic(al) realism should now be apparent. Reaffirming the theoretical foundations of magic and magical realism, contemporary Chinese films at the same time succeed in transcending these categories and reassembling their patterns in new poetical solutions. Blurring previously imposed classifications (such as Gonzáles Echevarría’s distinction between ontological and epistemological magical realism)⁶² or limiting postcolonial interpretations, these films show a more fluid appropriation of the concept. Magic(al) realism in contemporary Chinese film largely connects to specific postmodern features (metamorphosis, fragmentation, a plurality of visions, *pastiche*, and a disruption of classical realism), but does not limit its practice to this set of formal features. Rather, it roots its consistency and expressive power in the country’s historical and spiritual condition, and connects transversally to both past and concurrent, indigenous and foreign artistic practices. Whereas *mohuan xianshizhuyi* is the standard Chinese translation for ‘magical realism’, for the present analysis I suggest

⁶⁰ Jian, “Lun ‘San xia hao ren’ dui dianying yishu xianshizhuyi de chuancheng,” 110-15.

⁶¹ Cited in Lu, “Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism,” 126.

⁶² Echevarría’s analysis distinguishes between ontological magical realism – based on beliefs and practices that are indigenous to a specific cultural context – and epistemological magical realism – where the source of magic is not necessarily rooted in the cultural context in which the narration takes place (See Gonzáles Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier*). Similarly, Jeanne Delbaere distinguishes folkloric magic realism (close to the ontological) from scholarly magic realism (close to the epistemological), see Delbaere, “Magic Realism.”

considering a more fitting variant: *mohuan jishizhuyi*, magic(al) *jishizhuyi*. In this way, the legacy of the former realist configuration and the iconoclasm of the latter apparently result from the label itself. Moreover, following the arguments of chapter 3, the discussion can better focus on a specific brand of magic(al) realist filmmaking that takes shape as part of the overall allo-genetic development of *jishizhuyi*. Accordingly, the case studies considered below attempt to exemplify two main aspects of the discussion: on the one hand, the films' formal debt to *jishizhuyi* and the several ways in which the style is reconfigured in a process of progressive aestheticisation; and, on the other hand, the effectiveness and consistency of magic(al) realist elements in Chinese contemporary realist filmmaking.

2. CASE STUDIES

2.1 SUZHOU RIVER

Suzhou River by Lou Ye premiered at the Rotterdam Film Festival in 2000. Since then, the film has successfully travelled through the international art-house film circuit, possibly becoming Lou Ye's most acclaimed work to date. Its narrative and aesthetic innovations have been analysed in the academic field, in particular with reference to the theme of the double, the description of the urban milieu of Shanghai, and the influence of Western cinematic models (Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is most often cited).⁶³ However, the following analysis will focus more closely on its stylistic and aesthetic features, including the magic(al) realist ones, to understand how this film effectively represents an inaugural moment of passage from classic *jishizhuyi* to its allo-genetic form.

Suzhou River is a tale of love and obsession involving the motorcycle courier Mardar, the young Mudan, her apparent double Meimei, and a partially off-screen videographer who narrates most of the story. Mardar is hired to look after Mudan, the daughter of a rich businessman. They fall in love, but Mardar is also involved in a ruinous plan to kidnap the girl. When Mudan finds out about the criminal scheme, she jumps into the river and her body is never found. Years later, Mardar bumps into Meimei, a bar performer who looks exactly like Mudan. Breaking up with her boyfriend, the videographer, Meimei starts a relationship with Mardar, but his obsessive doubt about her possible double identity haunts their love affair.

⁶³ Scholarly interventions on *Suzhou River* include Hagerman, "Floating Consciousness"; Metzger, "The Little (Chinese) Mermaid"; Ortells, "Symptomatic Metafiction in Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*"; Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*; Xu, *Sinascapes*, 67-88; Zhang, "Urban Dreamscape".

The influential American film critic James Lewis Hoberman aptly defined the film as “a ghost story that’s shot as though it were a documentary – and a documentary that feels like a dream”.⁶⁴ This definition perfectly describes the tone that *Suzhou River* displays from the beginning. The film’s incipit presents a conversation between two lovers. We hear their voices but the screen is black: “If I leave you someday, would you look for me?” a female voice asks. “Yes,” the man says in return. “Would you look for me forever,” she asks. “Yes,” he replies. “Your whole life?” is the woman’s final question and the man replies, “Yes,” again. As the waves of the river progressively appear on the screen like shadows, the woman adds a last peremptory comment: “You’re lying (*ni sa huang*)”. Approximately thirty seconds into *Suzhou River*, the viewer has already been introduced to its major motif – the act of lying – an element that informs not only the film’s narrative structure, but also its aesthetic logic.

After this brief but relevant incipit, the film’s opening sequence consistently pertains to my argument of the progressive sophistication of the *xianchang* aesthetics as it manages to combine the roughness of the documentary approach with a considerable dose of stylistic extravagance. The footage actually belongs to a previous documentary project that the director was never able to complete.⁶⁵ Shot in grainy video, the sequence shows a collection of images portraying the real places, everyday activities, and people (who often peep into the camera) of the Suzhou creek. These images provide an intense feeling of ‘being on the scene at the present tense,’ but unlike the representational strategies adopted in previous *jishizhuyi* works, the visual material is stylistically arranged by means of frequent editing techniques, most notably rapid jump cuts, but also expressive camera work, slanting pans, refocusing, fades, zooms, and extra-diegetic music edited with ambient sounds (hammering, ship engines). Commenting on the scene, Jerome Silbergeld states that, “the audience thus is forcibly made aware of watching something more like a home movie, with a pseudo-naiveté that renders it more insistently ‘authentic’ than the spectacle of polished cinematic skills”.⁶⁶ Conversely, unlike Silbergeld, I contend that by displaying these techniques blatantly, the director aims to stress the cinematic potential of the formal features. Lou Ye thus signals a divergence from previous *jishizhuyi* filmmakers, whose reliance on an observational and often consciously amateurish attitude was meant to express authenticity by delivering “something [...] like a home movie”. By making explicit his “interests in forms instead of content,” Lou undertakes a “conscientious examination

⁶⁴ Hoberman, “Eternal Return.”

⁶⁵ In 1998 Lou Ye was producing the TV series *Super City* (*Chaoji chengshi*), aspiring to be the first Chinese digital film project. The series was supposed to be composed by a number of 47-minute long, Shanghai-based episodes and Lou’s contribution was tentatively named *The Rushing City* (*Benpao de chengshi*). However, funds were not sufficient and only six titles have been actually produced. As German producer Philippe Bober came on board, Lou Ye managed to rescue his project, film it in 16mm, and finally develop it into *Suzhou River*. Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*, 121n5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

of realism and search for alternative forms of representation”.⁶⁷ In other words, *Suzhou River* aims to express authenticity by providing a feeling of the real. The mesmerising, dizzying combination of formal elements in the opening scene does not aim to produce a reality effect on the viewer (as it is the case with classic realist texts), but rather builds up an almost hallucinatory feeling that attempts to go beyond the idea of observational *xianchang*. The viewer is thus introduced to a fragmented and fluid world of scattered images, aesthetically arranged to bypass their superficial indexicality and connect with the audience through an emotional link. It is exactly this emotional connection that delivers a feeling of the real in which the sense of realist authenticity is tightly bound to the director’s authorial sensitivity. In this sense, starting from its opening sequence, *Suzhou River* creates a magic realist atmosphere, as Roh would describe it.

Superimposed onto this visual configuration, the opening scene also presents a relevant verbal commentary. The narrative voice introduces the milieu by listing a series of concrete situations, activities and characters that populate the Suzhou creek: working people, pollution, newborn babies on boats, corpses of dead lovers floating on the river. As the last element on this list, the narrator adds: “I saw a mermaid once, sitting on the muddy bank combing her golden hair. But I’d be lying”. The mermaid is clearly a magical device listed alongside other concrete elements and, for this reason, placed on the same level of reality. However, for the second time in less than three minutes, the narrator reminds us that he could be lying. In this context, “I’d be lying” does not refer to a doubt regarding the actual possibility of a mermaid inhabiting the place – in that case, the film would have been an example of fantastic, and not magic(al) realist filmmaking. Rather, “I’d be lying” aims to declare the deceit of perception of a story that is filtered through the words of this specific narrator. In other words, the documentary perspective that the opening images seemed to offer is immediately compromised, not by the presence of a mermaid (whose relevance will be better explored later), but by a more insidious warning: in the relation with the on-screen reality, the viewer has to cope with an unreliable narrator. This figure entails a double implication: on the one hand, a value of subversion with respect to the omniscient, trustable narrator of traditional realist accounts; and, on the other hand, the active role of the viewer. According to James Agee, “most movies are made in the evident assumption that the audience is passive and wants to remain passive: every effort is made to do all the work – the seeing, the explaining, the understanding, even the feeling”.⁶⁸ By giving the unreliable narrator command of the story, the viewer is thus required to actively

⁶⁷ Xu, *Sinascape*, 78. Lou Ye further elaborates on this topic by interpreting the primary relevance of formal techniques over contents as a resistance against the idea of storytelling as transmission of ideological messages. Lou and Chen, “Quan shijie de daoyan dou zai jie jue shijian wenti,” 185.

⁶⁸ Agee, *Agee on Film*, 329.

engage in the construction of the narrative. Seeing, explaining, understanding and feeling are no longer received impulses that can be taken for granted, but are tasks for the audience to accomplish while trying to avoid being misguided.⁶⁹

The videographer actively enters the scene in the following sequence, and introduces himself by describing his work activities. The sequence is framed in a point-of-view (POV) shot. Given this particular visual and narrative perspective, the videographer is a figure in which the character, the director and the viewer conflate.⁷⁰ What we see on screen is supposed to be the reality as recorded by the videographer's camera; however we can see his hands and, consequently, they cannot be holding the medium. Due to this physical impossibility, the cinematic perspective is thus magic(al) per se. In this sense, the videographer symbolically embodies *jishizhuyi* itself and its utopic desire for complete fusion between the narrator and the camera. To put it differently, the eye through which we see the world is simultaneously the human eye and the camera eye. It is by exposing such a radical *xianchang* perspective that the film attempts to go beyond the limits of the style. During his presentation, the videographer states: "Don't complain if you don't like what you see. My camera doesn't lie". We are presented with a declaration of *jishizhuyi* poetics here; however, as a witness to the reality, the videographer is no longer an impassive spectator, but rather a subject overwhelmed by the events. This results in a profound ambiguity, this time not leading to the observational objectives of traditional *jishizhuyi*, but rather to an updated attitude towards the representation of reality. The events unfolding in front of the camera's eye are not spontaneous, but aesthetically framed and edited. Accordingly, both the narrative and aesthetic structure of the film undergo substantial changes from traditional *jishizhuyi*.

"My camera doesn't lie" is a provocative statement that the director introduces only to simultaneously question it. In this light, *Suzhou River* can be seen as a "formalistic challenge to the rules of Chinese cinematic realism that never allow self-questioning of the narrative mode and the realist content".⁷¹ More specifically, one can contend that this film represents a crucial moment of passage in Chinese film realist aesthetics in that it displays all of the typical *jishizhuyi* features while taking them to the extreme, namely, by submitting them to a process of allogenetic aestheticisation revealing a new stylistic sensibility. As mentioned previously, the

⁶⁹ Discussing the narrative effect of the unreliable narrator in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, 1994), Silbergeld stresses that this literary device has already established a remarkable tradition in the West, from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). However, the scholar contends that in China such a narrative perspective is still considered quite unusual. Silbergeld, *Body in Question*, 21.

⁷⁰ A similar consideration is presented in Zhang, "Building on the Ruins," 117. In the words of Lou Ye: "My subjective view makes this story original [...] What I really intended to do is discuss the author's view of this beautiful story as well as the relationship between the author and the story". Sun and Xun, *Lights! Camera! Kai Shi!*, 212-13.

⁷¹ Xu, *Sinascape*, 85.

persistent use of POV shots is a relevant example as this simultaneously discards both the objective pretension of *jishizhuyi* and the omniscient vision of classic realism. An interesting example of this argument can be provided with reference to those classic moments in *jishizhuyi* filmmaking, already explored in chapter 3, when the filmed subjects look into the camera. Given the POV perspective, the videographer's interlocutors often look straight into the camera, yet the resulting effect differs from traditional *jishizhuyi* works. A relevant scene can once again be found at the beginning of the film, when the videographer talks to the boss (Mudan's father) who assigns him the job. The man looks continuously into the camera, as the camera is the eye of the videographer, but unlike conventional realist accounts the editing cuts off bits of the conversation: as words go missing and movements look fragmented, the whole conversation becomes more and more ambiguous. This stylistic choice testifies to the confusion of the narration and highlights the process of subjective selection of the narrative contents. In other words, against the rules of observational *jishizhuyi*, the director clearly shows his presence by displaying his aesthetic sensitivity.

Another example of aesthetic extremisation of a *jishizhuyi* feature is the use of the hand-held camera. By accentuating the shaking and unstable visual characteristics of the device, the camera in *Suzhou River* often moves in an inconsequential manner, bending over non-linear trajectories. Although part of what the viewer sees on screen are images of the real city (vehicles in motion, people arguing or simply walking), such use of the hand-held camera does not primarily aim to document the surrounding environment, but rather aims to stress the subjective perspective of the videographer/director. This appears vividly in the scene in which the videographer and Meimei go out on a date and, walking along the street, the images of Shanghai at night look blurred and out-of-focus, underlining their emotional rather than material significance.

Finally, the use of an unreliable narrator constitutes a stylistic transgression in itself, as the very fact that a guiding voice, although partial, is presented in the story, stands against the virtual lack of this in observational *jishizhuyi*. Moreover, the stream of narration is consciously uneven. When Mardar returns to town after a voluntary exile following Mudan's disappearance, the unreliable narrator has doubts about how to keep on telling the story: "I don't know how to go on with this story. But maybe... Mardar can finish telling his story himself". This twist reveals the uncertainty of every (realist) narration and the ambiguity of perception: the narrating voice stops here, and a more conventional (non-POV) narrative perspective illustrates Mardar's vicissitudes until he meets the videographer in person. When this happens, through the use of editing cuts, the POV perspective of the narrator and the non-POV perspective of Mardar are rhythmically intertwined, building up a fragmentary sense of perceptive insecurity which pertains more to an emotional take on reality than to an objective one.

The sequence that fully displays the magic(al) potential of the film sees the young Mudan jumping into the river from a bridge, after the discovery that her beloved Mardar is part of a criminal scheme to kidnap her. “I will come back as a mermaid and I will find you again,” shouts the girl and, as she falls into the water, an editing cut shows a swimming mermaid who, just a few seconds later, is sitting on the riverbank combing her long blond hair. Silbergeld argues that in the Chinese artistic tradition it is not unusual to find young women committing suicide and then being transformed into deified spirits. In this way, the scholar underlines the obviousness of this supernatural event: “a Chinese audience watching Mudan plunge into the Suzhou River might regard the event as perfectly ‘natural’; and the audience might equally well anticipate her return in one incarnate form or another”.⁷² Despite its extraordinariness and the visual shock it creates within the urban context of the Suzhou creek, the mermaid is presented as a constitutive part of it. This feeling is reinforced by the image of a fisherman sailing up the river on a boat and reading a newspaper with an article entitled “*Meirenyu bu shi tonghua*”, “Mermaids are not a fantasy”. This headline does not aim to instil doubts or hesitation, but further pushes the viewer to accept the supernatural event as a natural expression of our everyday world. As for the reasons why Lou Ye chose the mermaid as a specific magic(al) device for this film, the debate is open. In several instances, commentators have noticed that the mermaid is not a figure pertaining to the Chinese tradition, thus signalling the globalising forces and Western influences affecting the popular imagery of today’s China. However, the director has discarded this reading as he deems cultural hybridity to be a constitutive characteristic of contemporary Chinese reality, so his intention was more to highlight this internal aspect than point to some external factors.⁷³ For the purposes of the present study, it is not of primary interest to investigate why the choice fell on this particular creature and not on another. Instead, what is more significant is the fact that this creature *de facto* exists and transgresses the logics of conventional realist accounts.

Interestingly, before jumping into the river, Mudan makes explicit the reason behind her act. “You lied,” the girl says to Mardar, and so the viewer is presented once again with the major motif of the film. More precisely, in this instance, the lie is highlighted as the fundamental element that triggers the magic(al). While the lie is presented as narratively and aesthetically magic(al), the opposite does not prove to be true; that is, what is magic(al) in the film is absolutely not a lie, but an essential part of reality. In other words, the lie is inherent in the factual real and thus the obviousness of the magic in *Suzhou River* coincides with the obviousness of the lie, the acknowledgment of the fallacy of the realist perception. This reading

⁷² Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*, 26.

⁷³ Lou and Chen, “Quan shijie de daoyan dou zai jie jue shijian wenti,” 194-95

is reinforced by the sentimental core of the film, in which the lie coincides, in considerable measure, with the lie of sentiments. In this sense, the film mainly refers to an inner reality that further stresses the impossibility of an objective vision of the real. Magnified by the director's aesthetic choices, *Suzhou River* contends that our approach to reality cannot but be subjective and, accordingly, distorted.

The use of magic(al) elements in *Suzhou River* aims to reflect on the subversive potential that these can exert on the text itself. Therefore, unlike the following case studies, magic(al) *jishizhuyi* here is not primarily applied to provide a social commentary on contemporary China; rather it operates on a purely formalistic level to expose the limits of *jishizhuyi* and finally exceed them. This argument is also substantiated by the rich net of multi-directional cinematic connections that have been detected with regard to this film. Most often, *Suzhou River* is associated to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* on the basis of their shared narrative and visual strategies.⁷⁴ However, Lou Ye surprisingly rejects this model as he deems it too artificial and unnaturally melodramatic: "It is almost unbearable to watch Hitchcock's films after you've been exposed to films by the French New Wave directors [...] If not for the need to complete a homework assignment [...] I would never even have watched his films".⁷⁵ Mentioning his major influences, Lou Ye refers not only to the French New Wave, but also includes New Hollywood directors such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg; the Japanese New Wave of the 1960s; and American independent filmmakers like John Cassavetes. Moreover, Lou Ye grants a special mention to the strand of Italian post-war cinema that followed Neorealism, namely, Federico Fellini and, most prominently, Michelangelo Antonioni. With Antonioni's cinema, Lou Ye shares the search for a style that can develop into a progressive refinement to let the director express his thoughts and emotions through a language that is primarily cinematic. It is by keeping in mind Antonioni's model that Lou Ye interprets reality as a subjective entity.⁷⁶ But how can we make sense of this net of multiple connections, both declared and disavowed? In his analysis, Silbergeld refers to the concept of *fang* that he translates as 'transformative imitation' and that, in traditional Chinese artistic practice, describes a referential homage. *Fang* represents the process by which an artist works in the style of another, but always adds a personal creative twist. Therefore, the point is not to create a mere copy, but rather to elaborate

⁷⁴ An exhaustive comparative analysis between *Suzhou River* and *Vertigo* can be found in Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*.

⁷⁵ Sun and Li, *Lights! Camera! Kai Shi!*, 165. Given Lou Ye's rejection of *Vertigo*, other films dealing with the theme of the double that have been associated with *Suzhou River* are Wang Quan'an's *Lunar Eclipse* (1999) and Krzysztof Kieślowski's *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991). See Sun, "Xunzhao Xunzhao xiaoyin de ling yi ban," 280; and Zhang, "Urban Dreamscape".

⁷⁶ Chen 181-83. As for Chinese cinema, Lou Ye declared his love for leftist classics such as *Street Angel*, *A Spring River Flows East*, and *Goddess*. Moreover, he revealed that he enjoyed the first works by the Fifth Generation – *Red Sorghum*, *Yellow Earth*, *One and Eight* – however he states that they did not influence him in any way. Sun and Li, *Lights! Camera! Kai Shi!*, 165-66.

on a model to develop something new.⁷⁷ I suggest that the idea of *fang* can also enlighten the functioning and purposes of transvergence: as scientifically proven paths of influence are hard to detect, the juxtaposition of different lines of flight creates meaning by suggesting possible logics that sustain stylistic variations such as those analysed in *Suzhou River*.

2.2 SHANGHAI PANIC AND WELCOME TO DESTINATION SHANGHAI

Shanghai Panic and *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* are the only two features directed by Andrew Cheng to this day.⁷⁸ Presented in 2001 and 2003 respectively, the two pieces form a digital diptych focusing on the city of Shanghai, its frenzy for change, and the underdogs that populate its streets. I describe it as a diptych not only because of the thematic consistency of the two films, but also because of their shared aesthetics, most notably, the use of DV as a privileged shooting medium. Although *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* shows a greater stylistic awareness than *Shanghai Panic*, both films attempt to go beyond a naturalistic rendering of reality, and mediate an emotional bond by means of specific aesthetic and visual choices.

Adapted from Mian Mian's novel *We Are Panic* (2000), *Shanghai Panic* is Andrew Cheng's debut feature and was first presented at the Vancouver International Film Festival in 2002, where it won the prestigious Dragons and Tigers Award. The film narrates the story of four characters – Bei, a young man, and his girl-friends Kika, Fifi, and Casper – as they spend their time hanging out in discos and KTV rooms, consuming cheap drugs, or simply wandering through the city. When Bei suspects that he has contracted HIV, the group is taken aback by a growing anxiety. However, this will also be a chance for them to share their painful life stories: difficult parental relationships, attempted suicides and betrayals. When Bei discovers that he is not ill (the symptoms might be ascribed to the collateral effects of drugs), the plot follows the young man in his confused relationship with his long-time male friend Jie: although Bei claims not to be homosexual, he tries to persuade his friend to have sex with him. Jie refuses Bei's offer, but the erotic tension underlying their friendship proves hard to deny.

Shanghai Panic is mostly a film about bodies and light. The digital camera captures the physicality of the characters' bodies in all their immediacy, without filters or post-production corrections. However, these same bodies change their appearance according to the particular light they are subject to. In the interiors, this might be the stroboscopic light of a dance floor or the cruel yellow light of a cheap living room lamp. In the exteriors, as a considerable part of the

⁷⁷ Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*, 13.

⁷⁸ The director's Chinese name is Cheng Yusu.

whole story is set at night and virtually no props are employed on the scene, the images tend to be very dark. The only shining objects are the shop signs and their neon lights that in turn illuminate the protagonists' bodies. In all of these cases, the lights are always artificial, cold, violent and insensitive, without shade and aiming to flatten the image to characterise the bodies more as fake plastic-like objects than vital organisms. This choice resonates with Roh's advocacy for a photographic quality of the image, which is able to combine a superficial matter-of-factness with an investigation of the spiritual undertones of reality. In this sense, overcoming mere naturalism, *Shanghai Panic* can be understood as an example of magic realist filmmaking. The only exception to the supremacy of the artificial lights takes place when Kika and Casper visit Kika's house in the countryside: here, for the first time in the film, we see the natural light of the sunshine. This choice is not accidental and is linked to the fact that this location is placed outside of Shanghai. In fact, the city, represented as a perverted hub of human decline and moral insufficiency, simply cannot shine in the daylight because, as Kika says, "this city is dead". Accordingly, a distinct sense of impending death haunts everything and everyone in the film: the suspicion of the disease, the unforeseeable effects of drugs, the stories of attempted suicides, and a city that is perennially in the dark.

Other scenes show an even more distinctive aesthetic stance. A relevant example can be found at the beginning of the film, in a sequence set within a disco portraying people dancing. Fragmented editing, flashing lights, and the camera rapidly panning and making the images blurred and out-of-focus: by relying on videoclip-like aesthetics, Andrew Cheng attempts to recreate that hallucinatory visual effect of the human eye subjected to blinking lights (as is the case in a disco). This sequence immediately follows that in which Bei tells his friends that he might have contracted HIV. For this reason, the viewer experiences a sense of uneasiness, an almost dizzying feeling of threat while watching the dance floor scene. The alternation of light and darkness, the restlessness of the camera and the obsessive rhythm of the music combine to affect the viewer's perception. As the images pass too quickly across the screen for the human eye to completely catch them, the viewer loses any fixed visual anchorage and is accordingly compelled to experience the scene from an emotional perspective. In other words, the director's aim is not only to deliver a list of material details that describe the surrounding environment, but also to express, through his authorial sensitivity, the spiritual and emotional condition of his characters. Similarly, in a few of the night scenes in the city, the contours of the people and things appear blurred; the images are willingly out-of-focus and their stream on screen is fragmented, unlike the soundtrack that keeps on going untouched. This creates a perceptive estrangement and a sensorial alienation that represent a consistent aesthetic counterpart of the director's narrative purposes. Just like the film's visual asset, everything in the film is confused: human relations, sexuality, aspirations, social positions, sentiments, the perception of the world

due to the effects of drugs, and doubts about the disease. Therefore, unlike traditional *jishizhuyi*, the director does not aim to present an observational account but, by assuming a distinctively aesthetic stance, his main purpose is to provide a feeling of the real that can effectively describe the bewilderment of the city and its underdogs.

Shanghai Panic thus represents an allogenic form of *jishizhuyi* filmmaking as it roots into this specific stylistic tradition while developing towards more aestheticised directions. The principle of *xianchang* is still taken into consideration in this first instalment of the diptych. This is apparent in those scenes that are actually shot on the streets of the city in which random people are included in the frame, and are virtually unaware of the cinematic apparatus. However, the use of the hand-held camera and the camera movements betray a stylistic construction that discards the principle of spontaneity. One relevant scene in this regard is that in which Kika and Casper discuss their friend and the possibility that he may have HIV. The camera frames their conversation from outside an open window. When Kika closes it, the camera moves towards an open door, until a woman arrives and closes that as well. In this way, the viewer perceives the camera as an external element, an intruder, or even a spy. There is not the virtual invisibility of the camera and its fusion with reality as prescribed by *jishizhuyi*. Conversely, the viewer recognises the presence of the director.

Unlike the contingent, mono-level reality presented by conventional *jishizhuyi* films, Andrew Cheng also activates a cross-media strategy to multiply the layers of reality. It happens in those cases in which the viewer is prompted to look through a double screen: the main one and a diegetic one. The first occurrence is when Kika, from the small screen of a portable camera, shows his friends the clip of a conversation with her husband who has just attempted to commit suicide. Later we see Bei and Jie playing videogames. Most shockingly then, towards the end of the film, the viewer gets a glimpse of a pedo-pornographic website on Bei's personal computer and shortly afterwards an excerpt from a porn movie that Jie allegedly took part in. Finally, in the last scene, Kika watches a family video on her TV screen. Whilst the videogame opens to a world of pure fantasy, the other images present unnameable realities in need of a double filter to mediate their disruptive contents. By multiplying the levels of reality the director ideally discards the 'here and now' pretension of *jishizhuyi* and rather acknowledges the complexity of reality and the many possible detours of life, especially the most unpleasant ones that hardly find a space in front of the camera. Interestingly, the last double screen (Kika watching a family video) is only outwardly a milder image: the nostalgic feeling gives the sense of a distant happiness that is impossible to achieve in the present life and exposes the ruthless reality gap between the two screens.

As previously mentioned, *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* presents a greater stylistic awareness than *Shanghai Panic*. While sharing common poetic concerns, the second instalment

of Andrew Cheng's digital diptych clearly represents a step forward in the allogenic process of the *jishizhuyi* style. This work intertwines the stories of several characters and deals with a variety of topics including prostitution, unemployment and immigration as well as broader issues such as morality, the traumatic inheritance of the socialist past, and the fast-paced transformation of Shanghai. The film starts as an erotically charged drama by introducing the character Jennifer, who hires men and women for what she defines as the 'meat and skin trade', namely prostitution. Among these, we find Irene, a young woman who is later killed by a client, and 'Good Boy', who thinks that selling himself might be a quick way to earn easy money but who soon experiences the humiliation of this profession. Then we have the fifty-something Ar Ling, an old friend of Jennifer's from the time of their re-education in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution: a would-be diva, working for a local TV channel and illegally earning extra money through a fake clinic offering hymen restoration. Ar Ling's background also includes her husband, who is actually homosexual, and her son, a disturbed teenager living in silence and grief.

As in *Shanghai Panic*, the use of lights and colours is central in the aesthetic construction of the film. Most of the frames consist of human figures who occupy the centre of the image. They are invariably illuminated by cold and fluorescent lights, while all around them, at the borders of the frame, a thick layer of darkness embraces everything. Accordingly, the scenes are infused with an oppressive sense of impending danger and a claustrophobic feeling of the unknown: nothing except the bodies of the characters is visible, and even those are shining due to the unnatural colours of the artificial lights. Moreover, from the opening sequence, the director develops an aesthetic intuition that was partially explored in *Shanghai Panic*. Whilst in the previous film the images often looked blurred and out-of-focus, here they take a step forward towards a greater aestheticisation and become proper masses of colour: the objects largely lose their defining contours and rather appear as huge fluorescent stains on the screen. As the glare of the moon in the sky is blue and the Huangpu river is shockingly red, the Shanghai cityscape becomes a visionary, expressionist composition of fluid colours. These fluorescent masses do not stand still, but rather tremble and extend their reverberations throughout the screen: they appear, interpenetrate and eventually disappear, providing a heightened sense of hyper-reality. Given such a strong visual outlook, the director obviously gives up any naturalistic rendering of reality, and rather filters it through his individual sensitivity. In other words, Andrew Cheng aims to create a magic realist atmosphere that, on the one hand, anchors the viewer to a specific environment – the city of Shanghai – and on the other hand, attempts to go beyond a materialistic description of it by submitting its contents to a process of visual supernaturalisation. The purpose of this aesthetic choice is to visually translate on screen an idea of mutation and hybridity, to express the uncertainty brought about by the fast-paced transformations of the

urban landscape, that in turn affect the ambiguous identity of its inhabitants, their moral values, alienation, bodies and sexuality. In the words of Cui Zi'en – director, scholar, godfather of the Chinese digital revolution, and also an actor in this film (he plays the role of the homosexual husband of Ar Ling): “Images are there in order to testify the idea of change, a fluid motion conveying a sense of transformation, but whose visual transposition is always uncertain: fluorescences deprive bodies of precise contours, and thus certify the impossibility of definition both for a city and an era without any certainty”.⁷⁹ This argument proves valid not only in a visual sense, but the uncertainty also works at the narrative level. One relevant example, for instance, concerns the names of the young sex workers. In fact, ‘Irene’ and ‘Good Boy’ are only nicknames, and their real names remain unknown. In this way, these alienated urban dwellers living at the margins of the city are radically cut off from the (official) reality and, due to the impossibility of presenting themselves with their real names/identities, it is almost as if they do not exist at all.

Interestingly, as already noted in *Shanghai Panic*, in this film too, natural light is only displayed when the characters are outside the city. An example of this is when Ar Ling’s troubled son is taken by a couple of friends to a village eighty kilometres away from Shanghai. The vision of the sunlight lasts only for a few seconds as the night quickly descends on the town. However, the landscape still looks enchanting: a group of ancient houses along a river, red lanterns, and a quiet sense of peacefulness. But the idyll is soon broken by the voice of a narrator (a friend of the teenager) who compares the red lanterns of the village to those in Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern*. Almost activating a transvergent strategy to create multiple meanings, this comparison entails a double allegation: on the one hand, it points to the sex-trade activities carried out in the village (it specifically mentions business men arriving from the city to spend the weekend with the country girls); and, on the other hand, more subtly, it discards the superficial perception of idyllic authenticity by linking it to the fake rituals portrayed in Zhang Yimou’s film.⁸⁰

Andrew Cheng’s digital diptych mainly focuses on the shocking transformations of present day China. However, it also deals significantly with the traumatic inheritance of the country’s past. In particular, it refers to the historical experience of the Cultural Revolution as two of the main characters, Jennifer and Ar Ling, are said to have been friends since the time of their re-education in the countryside, in the northern region of Heilongjiang. Out of the two, Ar Ling suffered the most from this experience, as she confesses the many hardships she had to go through to finally get back to Shanghai in the early 1980s. If the recent past is a painful trauma,

⁷⁹ Cui, “Il cinema digitale,” 171. See an interview with the director in Zhu and Wan, *Yingxiang chongdong*, 107-109.

⁸⁰ The rituals and ceremonies connected to the red lanterns in Zhang Yimou’s film are admittedly a narrative invention and are not rooted in any kind of existing Chinese tradition. This was one of the major criticisms voiced by the film’s detractors.

Chinese traditional culture as a whole is presented as an inadequate panacea. An eloquent scene from *Shanghai Panic* perfectly illustrates this point: Fifi and Bei want to pray for the young man who may have HIV, but the doors of the temple are (significantly) found to be closed. As they wait at the temple gate, a fortune teller joins them, but he is only able to babble some random and empty words that indicate the fundamental uselessness of the traditional culture in the face of pressing contemporary issues.

In the logic of the progressive aestheticisation of the *jishizhuyi* style, if compared to *Shanghai Panic*, *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* shows a more precise composition of the image and a more careful use of editing. In this sense, the major development consists in the virtual abandonment of the hand-held camera in favour of a fixed one. Often framing the picture in long shots, the stillness of the camera adds to the claustrophobic sense of entrapment that the narrative aims to convey. Moreover, it shows a specific coercive power as it forces the viewer to stare at unpleasant scenes, such as that of Jennifer's humiliating interview with 'Good Boy', in which the young man is forced to undress in front of her and crawl on the floor, and the sequence in which the same character has to perform a sadomasochistic sexual act with a client. Without displaying overtly supernatural elements, Andrew Cheng's digital diptych nonetheless sets a magic realist perspective as Roh would describe it: on the one hand, the photographic quality of the image is enhanced by the high-definition quality of the DV technology; and, on the other hand, the visual exaggerations aim to overcome naturalism and rather seek to unearth spiritual meaning beyond the simple surface of things. Moreover, as well as the pretension of objectivity that is automatically discarded by such a visual disposition, the diptych also testifies to the abandonment of the *jishizhuyi* principle of spontaneity. Best expressed in the passage from the hand-held to the fixed camera, the picture becomes increasingly aestheticised: within such a carefully arranged aesthetic construction, the director is able to communicate his subjective view beyond the limitations of contingent reality.

2.3 THE WORLD

The World was the first film by Jia Zhangke to be officially released in Chinese movie theatres and, ironically, is also one of his most bleak and pessimistic takes on contemporary China to date (possibly second only to his latest *A Touch of Sin / Tian zhuding*, 2013). The film is a relevant example of magic(al) realist filmmaking: while at the narrative level it still shares a major interest in typical *jishizhuyi* topics – the hardships of the lowest classes in present day China – at the stylistic level it embodies one of the most accomplished examples of allogenic aestheticisation.

The film is set in World Park on the outskirts of Beijing, a Disneyland-like place that contains small-scale versions of the planet's most famous sites, including the Eiffel Tower, Venice's St. Mark's Square, the New York cityscape and the Egyptian pyramids. Guards, dancers and all sorts of performers work in the park; most of them are migrant workers who have left the countryside in the hope of finding a better life in the big city. Among them are the dancer Xiao Tao and his boyfriend Taisheng, a security guard. Their relationship appears problematic as Tao's refusal to have sex with Taisheng increasingly frustrates the man. One day Tao meets Anna, a Russian performer who has just arrived at the park. They do not speak the same language, but become sympathetic friends nonetheless. As Anna quits her job and becomes a prostitute to earn enough money to leave the country, Tao is exposed to a sordid world that contrasts with her values. In the meanwhile, Taisheng embarks on an affair with a woman called Qun. As she leaves for France to join her husband, Tao discovers the illicit relationship. The final scene shows Tao and Taisheng; they are both dead due to a gas leak, possibly provoked by Tao herself.

The opening sequence ideally epitomises the evolution from *jishizhuyi* to an allogenic form of it. To follow Tao, who is looking for a plaster in the corridors and dressing rooms backstage of a theatre, the director employs a typical *jishizhuyi* technique, that is, a long take performed with a hand-held camera. From the perspective of classic film theory, the scene can be understood in terms of Zavattini's poetics of tailing, a concept that was introduced in chapter 3. As the camera chases Tao through an uninterrupted four-minute take, the viewer has the chance to explore the environment in which she lives and works. Aided by dynamic camera works, the opening shot imitates *jishizhuyi*'s spontaneity, but in fact nothing is left to chance; everything is carefully arranged to express the director's authorial intention. More precisely, the director's purpose in *The World* is to alternate contrasting images – the inside versus the outside, the bleak off-stage and the shining on-stage, the grim reality and the glittering spectacle – and to critically reflect on the meaning produced in this gap. In the opening sequence the picture goes from the narrow spaces backstage to the wide and sparkling appearance of the main stage; later in the film the contrasts between the closed environment of the World Park and the real world beyond its gates (or just the fantasy of it) make an even clearer point. Abandoning the contingent pretension of *jishizhuyi*'s spontaneity, Jia Zhangke displays these contrasts mainly by means of carefully arranged camera works. As Wu Guanping argues, such stylised movements of the medium (often panoramic shots) represent an attempt to express the deceitfulness of the environment.⁸¹ In addition, I would suggest that, as the camera physically wanders throughout diverging (concrete and discursive) spaces, at the same time it dynamically proposes an ideal route for the viewer's gaze to ultimately break the veil of spectacle and progressively unveil a

⁸¹ Wu, "Shijie' de jiaoluo," 35.

hitherto neglected reality. In the words of Wang Yanjie: “While the park invokes enchantment, the camera work of Jia helps lay bare a story much like ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’. The continuous shots featuring the limited space of the World Park shrouded in gloomy mist only remind the audience of the falsehood of the so-called world, which is nothing but a simulacrum that distorts and deceives”.⁸² Moreover, elaborating on Sun Pencheng’s suggestion that World Park embodies the postmodern while the backstage stands for the pre-modern⁸³, I would suggest that, in connecting these two spaces, the camera movements provide a full picture of the postsocialist age in China as a merger of pre- and post-modern elements.

In contrast to the democratic spirit that informs the practice of the long take in traditional *jishizhuyi* filmmaking, as the style undergoes a process of aestheticisation, later works rarely show that original quality. Conversely, the director compels the viewer to follow his cinematic vision, in which the trajectory of the gaze equals the subjective mind of the author. To mention just one example, this attitude is brilliantly exposed in a long take lasting one minute and twenty-eight seconds that shows two migrant workers entering the World Park. Dressed in cheap clothes and carrying heavy bags, the two men enter the frame from the right-hand side and, walking towards the left, look around in amazement and pass behind some smiling tourists who are having their pictures taken in front of the replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Then the camera gets close to them and, as they pass in front of the small-scale version of St. Peter’s Square (with the Eiffel Tower visible behind it), they apparently become the main focus of the medium’s gaze. They continue to proceed until they encounter four girls dressed as hostesses playing and joking near the replica of the Mouth of Truth. As the two men freeze in front of them, the dissimilarity looks stark: in contrast to the men’s awkward immobility, lousy outlook and depressing aura, the image shows four lively, well-dressed, happiness-spreading young women. As the hostesses, laughing and giggling, move past them, the camera turns back and decides to follow the girls, forgetting about its original focus and abruptly leaving the two migrant workers out of the frame. In this way, the director imposes his view on the audience, who in turn are encouraged to understand the critical stance implied in this constraining camera work. Moreover, as a more general consideration, this kind of stylised visual solution proves how an increasing aestheticisation does not automatically result in empty formalism, but rather produces critical meanings.

“Everything in *The World* is prime for loss or misperception,” argues Robert Koehler.⁸⁴ To highlight the idea that the World Park is a place of deceitfulness at many levels, including the illusion of a better life for its workers, the composer Lim Giong created a soundtrack of electronic

⁸² Wang, “Displaced in the Simulacrum,” 154.

⁸³ Sun, “Jia Zhangke ‘Shijie’ de ‘shijie’ jiqi wenhua yiyun,” 33.

⁸⁴ Koehler, “The World,” 57.

music that, in the director's view, has the capacity to convey the void of the characters' lives.⁸⁵ As for the cinematography, in agreement with his long-time collaborator Yu Lik-wai, Jia decided to employ lights and colours that would appear as fake as possible: in contrast to the dull grey colours of the theatre's backstage and the dormitories, the park shines with saturated shades symbolising the happy life that the protagonists convince themselves they are living.⁸⁶ In this sense, perception itself (of the world, of the self) becomes illusion.⁸⁷ To meaningfully express this idea, Jia Zhangke roots its aesthetic vision in the assumption that "visual language has the advantage of exposing absurdity and contradiction without claiming to resolve them".⁸⁸ In other words, by committing to specific aesthetic choices, the director aims to provide a feeling of estrangement from which the magic can be produced accordingly. Jia claimed that he "hoped to realise a compression of time, space, and events,"⁸⁹ hence this estrangement can be appreciated on three main interconnected levels: space, time, and the self.

"See the world without ever leaving Beijing" is one of the main advertising slogans of the park. In a sense, it tells the truth, as within the park one can find small-scale replicas of all of the major touristic sites of the planet. At the material level, the estrangement works first of all visually, as the viewer catches sight of places as distant as the Eiffel Tower and St. Peter's Square in one single glance. Moreover, it is also a matter of proportions, as the characters often look as high as the monuments. Spatial estrangement becomes more meaningful when understood in connection with the dimension of time, and in particular through the idea of motion. "Give us one day, we'll show you the world" states another major slogan of the park. Sitting on a monorail train circumnavigating the whole park, Tao calls Taisheng to tell him "I am going to India". India is only a few minutes away on the circular path of the train, which symbolically implies a suffocating closure with no way out. However, as "we are told that the entire route of the train only takes fifteen minutes to complete[,] the film brings to the fore the illusive nature of the mobility".⁹⁰ In a dimension in which the physical space is overtly deceitful and the idea of motion merely illusive, time also unfolds and is perceived in a distorted manner. If for Manuel Castells globalisation is fundamentally "an era where *timeless time* exists in tension with chronological time"⁹¹ – and the World Park is in fact a product of globalising forces – the temporal dimension here can rightfully be deemed as timeless too. Unlike Jia Zhangke's previous films in which the progression of time represented a fundamental aspect (especially in *Platform*), in *The World* the

⁸⁵ Cheung, "The 'Iron Cage' Constructed by Speed and Spectacle," 65.

⁸⁶ See Jia Zhangke's words in Roberti, Chatrian, Baglivi, and Pollacchi, "Nostalgia del futuro," 510-11.

⁸⁷ For a similar argument, see Shi, "Between Illusion and Reality," 229-30.

⁸⁸ Lu, "Fantasy and Reality of a Virtual China in Jia Zhangke's Film 'The World'," 165.

⁸⁹ Wu, "'Shijie' de jiaoluo," 35.

⁹⁰ Wang, "Displaced in the Simulacrum," 154.

⁹¹ Cited in Hubbard, "Manuel Castells," 74-75. Original emphasis.

difference between yesterday, today and tomorrow is practically non-existent. There is no actual progression and, conceptually, the flow of time remains strictly contingent and never related to any idea of broader change and development. Accordingly, the environment in which the characters are trapped is doubly oppressing: on the one hand, they are stuck in a non-progressive temporal dimension; and, on the other hand, they are caught within a single deceiving place that gives them the illusion of being part of a borderless 'world', which possibly they will never visit for real. The film keeps on suggesting a misleading idea of motion even in those sequences set outside World Park. In those cases, we mainly see the characters travelling in vehicles that they never get out of; therefore they have no direct contact with the real world out there. This consideration looks even more significant when we realise that the final destination of their journey is always the park, and thus a return to the cage rather than a chance to escape. Accordingly, for all of these reasons, in *The World* Jia Zhangke radically experiments with a new cinematic configuration in which the characters do not inhabit a temporal dimension, but an exclusively spatial one, although deceitful. In this way, life itself and the perception of it are also falsified: to be there or not to be there, standing still or restlessly running in motion, it does not change that much.

Lu Tonglin maintains that, "no one in the park can escape from the dismal reality, because their fantasy is also their daily reality".⁹² This remark leads us to consider the third kind of estrangement, the existential one, which arises as a consequence of both the spatial and temporal alienation. It does not limit itself to the illusion of those migrant workers who arrive at the park hoping to find a better life in Beijing, but rather works to highlight what Wang Yanjie defines as a "schizophrenic perception of the self". Referring to those scenes in the film in which the performers (including Tao) have to dress up in exotic costumes in order to become Indian dancers or Japanese geishas for the pleasure of the park's guests, Wang adds that "whereas their impersonation as cultural models from all over the world has enabled them to celebrate a cosmopolitan self, their return to the backstage reminds them of their true identity as migrant workers" – a process of disillusionment that at the aesthetic level is performed by the camera works analysed above.⁹³ Pushing this debate a little further, it proves interesting to notice how *The World* reflects on and paradoxically subverts issues of transnationalism, both at the social and the poetic level. Migrant workers (*mingong*) as part of the Chinese 'floating population' (*youmin*) represent the most notable case of internal migration in China. As for the protagonists of this film, they do not simply migrate from their native town to another city, but more significantly enter 'the world', which is a paradoxical transnational space. For Elizabeth Ezra and

⁹² Lu, "Fantasy and Reality of a Virtual China in Jia Zhangke's Film 'The World'," 178.

⁹³ Wang, "Displaced in the Simulacrum," 161.

Terry Rowden, “more often than not, transnational cinema’s narrative dynamic is generated by a sense of loss,” whereas this loss refers to a cultural authenticity that is perceived as in danger as long as normative concepts of ‘home’ look increasingly distant, both physically and discursively. Ezra and Rowden add that this feeling “prompts filmmakers to explore the ways in which physical mobility across national borders necessarily entails significant emotional conflict and psychological adjustment”.⁹⁴ But what if this physical mobility is falsified and national borders are sidestepped such as in the particular environment of the World Park? Hamid Naficy argues that “loneliness is an inevitable outcome of transnationality, and it finds its way into the desolate structures of feeling and lonely diegetic characters”.⁹⁵ If loneliness is a product of transnationalism, and this being a paradoxical transnationalism, what the film conveys is a paradoxical loneliness and an alienated sense of loss. In this sense, the existential estrangement acquires a wider relevance that includes major social and political issues. As Zhang Yingjin puts it, in *The World*, “the national is deliberately marginalized or bypassed [...] and this tactic of scale jumping [...] foregrounds new tensions of the local (small towns in the hinterland, migrant communities in globalized cities) and the global (Western commodities, global tourist landmarks)”.⁹⁶ The migrant workers employed in World Park therefore constitute a paradoxical diasporic community inhabiting a falsified world. This idea makes perfect sense when compared to Arjun Appadurai’s view that, “as groups move yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities [...] ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality (however large) has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders”.⁹⁷ Commenting on this “interstitiality”, Ezra and Rowden further contend that, “it is not surprising that so many films that problematize national or cultural identity take place in the ‘non-places’ of the post-industrial landscape”.⁹⁸ What makes this case particularly interesting is the fact that “the cracks between states and borders” in a non-place such as World Park are essentially fictitious: this paradoxical transnational context thus constitutes a discursive limbo that allows the rise of the magic.

“Being stuck here all day will turn me into a ghost,” says Tao, to evoke her deep existential estrangement. This line interestingly resonates with a quote from André Bazin: “there is no reason why a ghost should not occupy an exact place in space”.⁹⁹ Therefore, in *The World*, the magic is conveyed by the prescribed absurdity of the park itself, which is a maddened product of the intense process of globalisation affecting contemporary China. Here the

⁹⁴ Ezra and Rowden, “General Introduction,” 7.

⁹⁵ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 55.

⁹⁶ Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 26.

⁹⁷ Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 41.

⁹⁸ Ezra and Rowden, “General Introduction,” 8.

⁹⁹ Bazin, “The Life and Death of Superimposition.”

protagonists can reach the opposite corners of the 'world' in a few minutes by travelling on a monorail, without having an effective (economic) chance of leaving the park and embracing the real world. The striking contrast between the park's simulacra and the unreachable outer world, a falsified sense of motion and the factual paralysis, thus lead to confused perceptions of reality, space-time connections and personal identity. It is basically an issue of false versus true, experienced on an everyday basis as an obvious matter – the obviousness of the magic – as the director's own words testify: "This lack of contact with the reality makes me think that we are living in a factitious world, but the events happening everyday are true stories".¹⁰⁰

Lu Tonglin contends that, "paradoxically, because Jia makes no pretence of representing China allegorically, his film accurately captures its fantasy space as a world of virtual reality".¹⁰¹ Aesthetically, this translates into a magic(al) choice of great visual impact, namely a series of animation sequences that gives (virtual) shape to the illusionary gap between fantasy and reality. These scenes take place at certain points in the film in which the emotional outbursts of the characters require an appropriate visual transposition. The frustration of love, the beginning of a thrilling affair, the hope of a better life, the death of a friend: the animations in *The World* portray images from the private sphere of the characters' inner feelings. Most notably, these sequences shape the only spatial dimensions that properly exceed the park and delineate a centrifugal movement: we see Tao flying in the sky and the symbolic full-speed passage of a train, for instance. Although, ironically, this space is merely imaginary and illusionary, it significantly highlights a sense of mobility and escape from the constraining logics of the park. This mobility must also be intended as upward social mobility, which is actually the underlying purpose of all the migrant workers in the park. In this respect, the last animation sequence looks particularly relevant as, occurring in the moment in which Tao discovers Taisheng's betrayal, it presents the image of a carp restlessly flailing within a colourful virtual space. Lu comments on the scene by reminding us that, "in the Chinese legend, a carp will become a powerful dragon if it succeeds in jumping over the lofty dragon gate (*liyu tiao longmen*) – a traditional metaphor for upward mobility". However, the scholar also notices that, "in this scene, a curbed line in front of the swimming carp always blocks her passage. In the end, the carp remains a carp; social mobility is impossible even in Tao's fantasy world".¹⁰² In this sense, the animations further stress the ambiguity of the film since, on the one hand, they help the characters to emotionally transcend the cage in which they are confined while, on the other, they actually discard any hope of a better life. These animation sequences start whenever the protagonists receive a text message on their mobile phones; therefore we can understand them as a development of the double-

¹⁰⁰ Wu, "'Shijie' de jiaoluo," 35.

¹⁰¹ Lu, "Fantasy and Reality of a Virtual China in Jia Zhangke's Film 'The World'," 178.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 177.

screen poetics already noticed with regard to Andrew Cheng's *Shanghai Panic*. In *The World*, the images of the second screen give form to emotional realities that cannot be expressed in the rational structure of the first-screen space. Significantly, unlike Cheng's diptych, the animated realities here do not remain confined within a diegetic second screen, but expand to occupy the entire visual spectrum, further highlighting the fundamental overlap of truth and illusion. In his analysis of the film based on Giorgio Agamben's theory of *dispositif* and profanation, Lu Tonglin focuses on the object that activates the magic(al) mechanism, namely the mobile phone, "a *dispositif* par excellence in that it constantly mediates, if not mutilates, interpersonal communication".¹⁰³ In Lu's view, this process of mediation/mutilation is carried out by turning the characters' feelings "into a visual cheerful and caricatured spectacle, as if all their emotions were an integrated part of the Chinese Disneyland".¹⁰⁴ On this same line of enquiry, Wang Yangjie argues that:

contrary to the realism category commonly ascribed to the films of Jia Zhangke, the animated portions of the film instead demonstrate a surrealistic dimension. If realism demands an authentic portrayal of reality (although an impossible mission), surrealism urges on to weigh the medium itself and to infer what the medium conveys. The animation obstructs the coherent flow of filmic narrative, directing the attention of the audience from the story to the means of representation.¹⁰⁵

Wang opposes realism – "an authentic portrayal of reality" – and surrealism, which, in the light of my previous discussion, one can better understand as super-realism or supernaturalisation. In my view, the potential for authenticity in a given work is not nullified by an aesthetic stance that aims to stress the presence of the medium and its expressive capacity. Conversely, it testifies to a more conscious use of the cinematic means beyond the unattainable pretension of a realist total cinema. If for authenticity we understand the genuineness of the director's subjectivity that filters his perception of the world through his distinctive sensitivity, then the aesthetics of *The World* are a product of this same authenticity. More specifically, the animations fit in with the idea of an allogenetically-modified realism in that they are conceived as a constitutive part of the characters' reality, a reality that is already pure fiction itself. Therefore, combined with the photographic accuracy of the digital image in the non-animated

¹⁰³ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 170. Conversely, the renowned film critic Robert Koehler argues that the animation sequences unveil the potential for poetry to hide behind sterile rituals of our contemporary daily life such as text message communication. Kohler, "The World," 57.

¹⁰⁵ Wang, "Displaced in the Simulacrum," 158-59.

sequences and the peculiar camera works described above, animations represent another way of expressing the magic, providing an overtly visual rendering of the protagonists' inner reality.

The last scene of the film is a black screen. The viewer has just seen the bodies of Tao and Taisheng lying dead on the snowy ground. But even death is subject to fundamental uncertainty in *The World* as we hear Taisheng's voice asking: "Are we dead?". From the dark, Tao's voice replies, "No. This is just the beginning". Ideally linked to the black-screen incipit of *Suzhou River*, Jia Zhangke's *The World* ends with a last, estranging magic(al) hint. The park represents a double, illusive and elusive reality, "a fantasy space that is at the same time an overwhelming reality".¹⁰⁶ How is it possible for realism to give account of such an ambiguous and unstable reality? Leaving behind the limitations of classic film realism and standard *jishizhuyi*, it must be by means of another realism, allogenetically-developed to adapt more flexibly to a multi-faceted reality, that Chinese filmmakers conduct their search – a magic(al) realist aesthetics, a realism of the impossible.

2.4 STILL LIFE

Another film by Jia Zhangke, his 2006 feature *Still Life*, represents quite a remarkable example for the present discussion. Artistically, it marked the apex of the international recognition of Jia Zhangke's cinema (the film won the top prize at the Venice International Film Festival) and, theoretically, it radically reconfigured the cinematic configuration of *jishizhuyi* by displaying a full range of subversive magic(al) realist features.

Set in the Three Gorges area, once popular for its environmental beauty and nowadays well-known for its gigantic hydroelectric dam,¹⁰⁷ the story follows two distinct characters, a man and a woman, who have moved from the northern province of Shanxi to the southern town of Fengjie in order to find their missing spouses. Han Sanming is a poor miner who is looking for his wife who left him sixteen years previously. He finds her along the river and they decide to start again together. Shen Hong is a nurse who is searching for her husband - an engineer working at the dam - after two years of being apart. Melancholically dancing on the riverside,

¹⁰⁶ Lu, "Fantasy and Reality of a Virtual China in Jia Zhangke's Film 'The World'," 178.

¹⁰⁷ The Three Gorges Dam (*San xia daba*) is a hydroelectric dam located in the southern province of Hubei on the Yangtze River. Its construction began in 1994 and was completed in 2012. The main goals of the dam are the production of electricity, the increase of the river's shipping capacity and the reduction of floods. However the project is highly controversial since, as many humanitarian and ecologist associations have reported, it caused the displacement of 1.24 million people and four million more will be encouraged to leave by 2020. Moreover, the dam flooded 1300 archeological sites, put the quality of the water and the biodiversity of the Yangtze River at risk, and increased the danger of landslides. Information regarding the Three Gorges project can be found on the official website of the China Three Gorges Corporation, <http://www.ctgpc.com.cn/> (accessed April 9, 2014).

they understand that their love is over. In the backdrop are the monumental construction of the dam and the apocalyptic destruction of the surrounding space: the persistent sound of hammering, the demolition of houses and villages, the level of the water implacably rising to submerge everything, addresses that are lost forever, and uncertainties and confusion among the people. Fengjie is a town at the end of the world that stands as a symbol of an entire nation caught up in a ruthless rush towards modernity, determined to pursue progress even to the detriment of the population, the environment, and its cultural history.

Jia Zhangke and his crew first reached Fengjie in 2005 to shoot *Dong*, a documentary that follows the painter Liu Xiaodong in the creation of his work *Wenchuang* (Breeding Ground). In several interviews and articles, the director describes how he started to conceive the idea of a feature film while shooting the documentary. Looking at the large-scale demolition, and feeling the urgency of such a monstrous process, Jia Zhangke became increasingly interested in the actual lives of the people and the contrast between their innate inner strength and the existential threat caused by the dam.¹⁰⁸ The production of *Still Life* thus began only a few days after the completion of the documentary: it started out of absolute spontaneity, brought about by the sudden inspiration of the moment, literally “on the scene”, to borrow a typical *jishizhuyi* terminology. Accordingly, these circumstances contributed to the film’s strong documentary-like outlook. Many expressive devices typical of *jishizhuyi* cinema are recognisable throughout the piece: the preference for location shooting, the predominance of natural light, the use of non-professional actors (with the exception of the female lead Zhao Tao), and the diffuse sense of closeness to the everyday reality (favoured also by the use of digital technology). All of these features come together to reinforce the documentary perception in a work whose final editing presents scenes that were filmed “without knowing whether they would be used in the documentary [*Dong*] or the feature film”.¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, the film also activates meta-cinematic detours characterised by converging scenes and alienating presences (for instance, *Still Life*’s fictional male lead Han Sanming who figures as a ‘real’ worker in *Dong*).¹¹⁰ Sebastian Veg interprets this “blurring of the boundary between fiction and documentary” as the definition of a new aesthetics which finds a balance between two expressive drives: it “engages with reality without being subjected to it” but at the same time appears to be “reluctant to erect the

¹⁰⁸ Jia, “Zhe shi women yi zheng dairen de nuoruo,” 180-82.

¹⁰⁹ Veg, “From Documentary to Fiction and Back,” 136.

¹¹⁰ Han Sanming activates further meta-cinematic mechanisms in the cinema of Jia Zhangke. For the record, Han is a cousin of Jia Zhangke, who the director met randomly during the shooting of *Platform*. At the time he was working as a miner in the northern region of Shanxi and, after their casual meeting, he was offered a part in the film: he played the part of a miner, a cousin of the protagonist Cui Mingliang. We see Han Sanming again in *The World* playing the part of a relative of ‘Little Sister’, a migrant worker who dies in the park. The meta-cinematic device is further stressed by the fact that Han Sanming is both the real name of the actor and the name of all of the characters he plays.

completeness of a utopian fictional narrative as an alternative to reality”.¹¹¹ However, commenting on the genesis of *Still Life*, Jia seems to add another nuance to this argument. During a reflection on the models used for Liu Xiaodong’s painting, the object of the documentary gaze in *Dong*, he states that, “those silent men have stories that they cannot easily tell for too much pain in their hearts. Hence, I began shooting the feature film *Still Life*”.¹¹² Implied in this statement are the limits of the documentary gaze, an acknowledgement of the importance of what the human eye cannot see (but can perceive) through what is present on the screen, and a recognition of the unlikelihood that the outer material world can reveal its inner spiritual truth just by being exposed to the eye of the camera. This is by no means a declaration of feature films’ superiority over documentary, but rather a new critical approach towards reality that directly challenges the theoretical assumptions of *jishizhuyi*.

Jia Zhangke explains why he likes Liu Xiaodong’s works: it is because they “discover the poetic flavour that we are not able to perceive in our everyday life”.¹¹³ As with the earliest theorisation of magic realism, once again a discourse on collateral investigations of reality seems to begin with painting. Inspired by Liu’s art, Jia Zhangke starts his own cinematic analysis of reality. In Jia’s own words: “A still life represents a reality neglected by us and although it persistently preserves the traces of time, it still remains silent, holding the secret of life”.¹¹⁴ This statement brings to mind what Roh defines as the “mystery” that “hides and palpitates behind” the surface of everyday reality, the magic perspective that has to be set in order to catch the complexity of the real when the materialistic depiction of things proves to be inadequate if conducted without a sharper attention to the spiritual undertones. The idea of magic, as understood by Roh, is a major component in *Still Life*. Through the film’s specific cinematic gaze, the overall backdrop is manifestly magic in itself. The destruction of Fengjie and the progressive flooding of its ruins embody a monstrous poetical entity, while the hieratic pace of the camera seeks to find the most appropriate aesthetic treatment for its representation: the ruins unceasingly occupy most of the frame, the writings on the wall signalling the progressive rising of the water level act as an aching *memento mori*, and the trajectories of the characters through this Chinese wasteland gain a surreal quality. The technical devices employed to depict the reality of the Three Gorges combine to reinforce the sense of magic. In the opening scene, a panoramic shot shows us a group of people – men and women, including elderly people and children – travelling on a boat up the river. The cinematographer Yu Lik-wai masterfully exploits the potential of light and digital technology, shifting from the sharpest focalisation to a

¹¹¹ Veg, “From Documentary to Fiction and Back,” 131 and 137.

¹¹² Rayns and Jia, “Zhaodao ren zishen de meili,” 224.

¹¹³ Jia, “Zhe shi women yi zheng dairen de nuoruo,” 180.

¹¹⁴ Jia, “San xia hao ren’ daoyan de hua,” 167.

dissolving blurredness, alternatively showing the bodies of women and bare-chested men as almost palpable and completely evanescent, adding a pronounced pictorial quality to the ensemble composition. The visual configuration of this first scene is already representative of the film's aesthetic management of reality, swinging between documentary observation and poetical reflection, appearing close to the viewer's personal experience, yet remaining undefined if not indefinable at the same time. Moreover, a specific use of sound underpins the magic relevance of the film. For instance, in the several scenes showing the relentless work of the men in charge of the dismantling, one can notice how the sounds are not casually juxtaposed to the images, but rather carefully edited to compose a symphony of noises. The sound of the hammer hitting the wall and that of the building cracking into pieces thus lose their randomness and are aesthetically re-arranged to convey additional meanings and inner feelings beyond the surface of plain reality.

Throughout the film, the use of magic elements becomes more and more daring, as it concerns not only the use of particular technical devices. A series of concrete elements is provided, a set of characters and situations still linked with everyday occurrences, but whose function within the narration is transcended beyond their physical contingency: a fire-eating masker welcomes the disoriented Han Sanming upon his arrival at the pier, a professed magician turns blank paper into Euros and then into *Renminbi*, and a junction box short-circuits at the exact moment that Shen Hong hears that her husband has an extramarital relationship. However, in order to better understand the magic use of these elements, two scenes in the film provide a helpful illustration. While documenting the extensive dismantling of the buildings, the camera is focused on the tanned and bare-chested body of the workers when suddenly a crew in charge of the disinfection of the area enters the frame. Wearing their bulky suits, the crew walk across the ruins spraying disinfecting liquid. However their cumbersome movements and the electronic sound associated with their actions combine to add magic relevance to the scene: clumsily climbing over piles of rubble, with their heads hidden behind safety helmets, they appear more like astronauts on an unknown planet, alertly crossing mysterious places, and highlighting the sense of estrangement that surrounds Fengjie. Immediately afterwards, in a semi-darkened room, a young boy sings a pop song at the top of his lungs; he walks almost unnoticed across the crowded space and then disappears out of the frame, "just like an angel".¹¹⁵ More than a physical body, the boy thus acts as a ghostly creature. He does not add anything to the narrative development of the story, but his presence is unmistakably necessary to set a tone, to express a mood, and to convey a feeling.

¹¹⁵ Jia, "Zhe shi women yi zheng dairen de nuoruo," 182.

All of these elements perfectly apply Franz Roh's theorisation by showing the material details of reality through a close and sensitive analysis of its spiritual undertones. However, there seems to be another gap that still needs to be filled: the contrast between a reality that is said to be 'everyday' while at the same time being undeniably extra-ordinary. The very idea of Fengjie – the destruction and flooding, the trauma of dislocation, the environmental and cultural hecatomb – testifies to a reality that has overcome itself. How can a realist director give account of this? Jia Zhangke states:

On *Still Life*, I initially thought I wanted it to be very realistic, but I couldn't ignore the surreal aspects of the Three Gorges landscape. I had to use fantastical elements, because without them I wouldn't have been able to adequately express the utter strangeness of our contemporary reality. I wanted to depict the compression of time, the sense of no longer living a natural existence.¹¹⁶

In order to address the monstrosity of the contemporary time, Jia Zhangke includes a set of overtly supernatural features. Given the impossibility of catching reality in a straightforward manner, reality is sought by means of subjective fantasy.¹¹⁷ These elements can be seen in the light of Angel Flores' theory of magical realism, since they are not only extraordinary, but their supernatural character also acquires a fundamental obviousness in their relation with the surrounding environment – what I have previously defined as the obviousness of the magic. These features have to be intended as an integral part of an obvious reality: they are not subjective images of the characters' subconscious or hallucinations, they do not take place within unrealistic settings, and their presence is not questioned by any doubt or hesitation. Instead, they are a constitutive part of the real and thus deserve to be investigated as such. The first magical feature appearing in the film is a UFO that breaks through the mountains and crosses the sky.¹¹⁸ It captures the characters' sense of being lost while fighting for a better future among the enormous changes of contemporary China. The two protagonists raise no clamour at the sight of the flying object, testifying that abnormal situations have become routine daily matters. Jia Zhangke commented on the insertion of the UFO in the film:

One day, during the shooting, I was walking along the river when suddenly it started thundering and raining and nature itself became

¹¹⁶ Cited in Chain, "Moving with the Times," 42.

¹¹⁷ Zhang, "San xia hao ren," 24.

¹¹⁸ Almost as a prelude to this, in a scene of the *The World*, while Tao and 'Little Sister' are talking in the area of a construction site, an aeroplane passes above their heads. Given the film's overall tension between a desire for mobility and their actual entrapment, the passage of the plane provides a similar effect as the UFO.

absolutely mysterious. I raised my head and wondered whether it would be possible for a UFO to cross the sky and see me. Because after the enormous changes we are witnessing, a lot of things that go beyond reality could happen, and they could change a part of this reality as well.¹¹⁹

I think surrealism is a crucial part of China's reality. In the past 10 or so years, China has experienced the kinds of changes that might happen across a span of 50 or even 100 years in any normal country, and the speed of these changes has had an unsettling, surreal effect [...] The changes had occurred so fast and on such a large scale, it was as if a nuclear war or an extraterrestrial had done it.¹²⁰

Later in the film, other magical elements are shown in order to convey an intense feeling of precariousness and incomprehensibility: a strangely-shaped building takes flight like a rocket and a man is walking along a tightrope suspended between two ruined buildings in the closing frame of the film. Furthermore, the film also displays a sense of nostalgia for a disappearing world. In a suggestive scene, a television broadcasts a TV version of the *Records of Three Kingdoms* (*San guo zhi*, Chen Shou, third century). Panning from right to left, the long take ends by framing three characters wearing Sichuanese opera clothing, who are sitting around a table playing with mobiles and videogames and looking forlorn. Zhao Hao identifies these maskers as Liu, Guan and Zhang, the heroes of the *Three Kingdoms*.¹²¹

While still employing classical realist devices inherited from *jishizhuyi* – location shooting, long takes, and non-professional actors – and exhibiting an overall documentary-like outlook, *Still Life* subjects its contents – the materiality of Fengjie – to the same process of supernaturalisation that Bazin mentions in his writings. By disposing of this poetical reordering of the world through the insertion of magic and magical features, the film testifies to the incompleteness of the *jishizhuyi* approach: if contemporary China is “more surreal than real,”¹²² it needs its super-real elements to be portrayed and explained. Taking a camera onto the street and letting it film whatever is passing by for the sake of absolute spontaneity and objectivity is not sufficient to provide an exhaustive account of China's contemporary condition. What Jia Zhangke shows is therefore a completely different approach to contemporary reality, which leads to a significant stylistic redefinition of the way in which filmic realism is conceived in the Chinese context. While breaking away from all of the previous traditions, this kind of allo-genetic magic(al) *jishizhuyi*

¹¹⁹ Cited in Wu and Wang, “Zai chanyehua chaoliu zhong jianchi ziwo,” 31. This statement resonates with Gabriel García Márquez' words: “I am a realist writer [...] because I believe that in Latin America everything is possible, everything is real”. Cited in Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 92.

¹²⁰ Cited in Chain, “Moving with the Times,” 41.

¹²¹ Zhao, “Zai lingluan de xianshi zhong xunzhao guisu,” 24-25.

¹²² Rayns, “Still Life.”

does not discard the idea of realism itself, but rather re-traces its cinematic borders. What is first radically questioned is the concept of *xianchang*, since the margins for total spontaneity, casualness and improvisation which characterised the spirit of *jishizhuyi* are noticeably restricted. The narrative developments of the story, the composition of subjects and objects within the frame, and the post-production finishing instead lead to a degree of productive aestheticisation that allows the director to consciously shape his idea of the world on the screen, instead of being fully subject to the unscripted occurrences of an uncontrolled outer reality. In this process, it is not an unmediated reality which represents the main concern of realism, but rather the construction of the ‘feeling of the real’ discussed in the previous chapter. Accordingly, this *zhenshigan* allows for a greater depth of authenticity, a virtue which now coincides with the director’s own sensibility and that supports the idea that nothing can be more genuine than our own feelings for and reactions to particular environments and stimuli. Unchained from the contingency of a strictly documentary viewpoint, this updated realism thus aims to reach a wider completeness in the description of reality, a portrayal not only of its material side, but of its spiritual – if not even magic(al) – nuances too.

CHAPTER 5

IMPURE TRUTH

“Reality is no longer terra firma;
it has become ice that is continuously cracking.”
(Lü Xinyu, “Xin jilu yundong de li yu tong”, 14)

Having discussed the adoption of magic(al) realist aesthetics in chapter 4, this final chapter addresses a second transgressive trend, which I refer to as the deliberate interplay of fiction and non-fiction. As another allogetic detour within contemporary Chinese cinema, this tendency pushes the limits of realist representation by operating aesthetically on a very ‘raw nerve’ of the *jishizhuyi* style, namely the grey zone at the intersection between documentary and fiction. By subverting categories, definitions and expectations, this stylistic configuration challenges the viewer through the unfolding of a contested epistemological process, and radically exposes the instability of any notion of truth, reality and realism.

The case studies examined in this chapter are Huang Weikai’s *Disorder*, Jia Zhangke’s *24 City*, Liu Jiayin’s *Oxhide* and *Oxhide II*, and Wang Bing’s *The Ditch*. Their generic categorisation is intentionally heterogeneous (*Disorder* is a documentary, *The Ditch* is a feature film) and perhaps even debatable (what category do *24 City* and the *Oxhide* diptych fit in?) but I have chosen documentary film – its theories, debates, aesthetics and perspectives – as an entry point for discussion and employed its analytical tools to account for the magmatic composition of these works. In the light of my argument regarding the progressive aestheticisation of the realist style in contemporary Chinese cinema, I understand these films as an allogetic development of the documentary practice and, more specifically, of the New Documentary Film Movement that emerged in the 1990s. Whilst the latter has promoted a non-fiction practice aiming to show reality as unvarnished, unmediated and spontaneous, its allogetic derivation instead presents refined aesthetic structures that largely give up contingent spontaneity and rather reflect on the creative possibilities of aesthetic mediation. In order to clarify this stance as well as the main conceptual and contextual issues at stake, the first part of the chapter investigates questions of authorial mediation, fictionalisation and performativity in documentary film. Subsequently, the second part presents close readings of the abovementioned titles.

1. PERFORMATIVE JISHIZHUYI

1.4 A TRUTH OF THE TEXT

Responding to criticisms regarding the scientific inaccuracy of *Gravity* (2013), a 100-million-dollar sci-fi movie about an astronaut adrift in outer space, director Alfonso Cuarón explained: “this is not a documentary. We had a lot of advice from astronauts and physicists, so we’re conscious of everything that’s not accurate. [...] People are smart enough to know this is just a [fiction] movie”.¹ Cuarón’s statement is interesting because it unearths some widespread assumptions about documentary, fiction, and the relation between the two. Documentary is expected to be a rigorously detailed record of facts that faithfully reflects a science-proof world, whereas fiction films are made-up stories whose relation to physical reality is not always scientifically certifiable, and this does not represent a concern. Moreover, to distinguish between these two categories, one relies on his/her own perceptiveness: when watching a film, we are expected to promptly understand whether it is fiction or non-fiction, and accordingly project a codified set of epistemological expectations onto the film itself. But should we assume that this clear-cut compartmentalisation applies to all film productions? Is such a distinction between fiction and non-fiction always tenable? And furthermore, are we always able to readily distinguish between the two? Under what circumstances might doubts arise, and what are the consequences of this for our viewing experience and for the film’s representational coherence?

Scholars have long sought a working definition of documentary, that is, a formula that can embrace its objectives and clearly set it apart from fiction films. However, their perspectives and positions are various and at times even diametrically opposed: these range from Bill Nichols’ claim that “every film is a documentary” – either a “documentary of wish-fulfilment”, e.g. fiction documenting our imagination, or a “documentary of social representation” – to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s argument that “there is no such thing as documentary” since “reality [always] runs away, reality denies reality”.² In exploring the middle ground between these two opposing statements, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction remains an open question. Noël Carroll claims that it “cannot be grounded in differences of formal technique, because, when it comes to technique, fiction and non-fiction filmmakers can and do imitate each other”.³ In fact, we commonly see fiction films adopting formal techniques that are traditionally ascribed to the documentary practice (e.g. long takes, synchronous sound, and natural light) and documentaries employing representational strategies typical of non-fiction works (e.g. staging and re-

¹ Cited in Huddleston, 2013: *A Space Odyssey*, 55.

² Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 1; Trinh, “The Totalising Quest of Meaning,” 90, 101.

³ Carroll, “Non-fiction film and Postmodernist Skepticism,” 286.

enactment). For Chu Yingchi, “the most obvious difference between fiction film and documentary can be seen in the way they (re)present the filmed *objectivities*,” that is the “(re)presentational split” for which the filmed objects in fictional representations tend to stand for something other than their original self: actors do not usually play the role of themselves, places tend to be fictive landscapes or film sets, and so on.⁴ However, as Chu concedes, this (re)presentational split does not occur as a fixed rule and in fact one can point out several exceptions. Similarly, Michael Renov argues that the difference lies in “the extent to which the referent of the documentary sign may be considered as a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context rather than fabricated for the screen”.⁵ However, this definition appears vague too, and in the end contestable: how can we deal with fiction films whose referent is in fact “plucked from its everyday context” and with documentaries whose referent is, in its own way, fabricated?

In sum, it is problematic to account for the distinction between fiction and non-fiction by focusing only on the inherent qualities of the text. Hence one should instead expand the field of dispute. Renov argues that, “at the level of the sign, it is the differing historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart not the formal relations among signifier, signified, and referent”.⁶ By hinting at the extra-textual relation between the parts involved, we are thus urged to consider the context in which a film is produced and received. Carl Plantiga claims that the distinction between the two categories is dependent upon contextual factors, implying that the very act of distinguishing between documentary and fiction is socially negotiated.⁷ Plantiga further claims that there is no ideal spectator, but rather that each “viewer actually defines and constructs the text within the process of viewing”.⁸ This is an articulation of what Dai Vaughan defines as the “documentary response” of the spectator in relation to a given film text. In Vaughan’s own words, documentary does not describe “a style or method or genre of filmmaking, but a mode of response to film material”.⁹ In charge of interpreting and (co-)producing meaning, the viewer will respond to the documentary text in a way that acknowledges its specific relation to the world’s actuality. As Paul Ward states, this does not imply that spectators will naively take the filmed material as a direct record of the world, but rather that they will recognise the film’s attempt at making statements about the real. In addition, this also explains why we are likely to display a documentary response in relation to non-fiction films presenting a problematic indexical status, such as animated documentaries or

⁴ Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 16-17. Original emphasis.

⁵ Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 7.

⁶ Renov, “Introduction,” 2.

⁷ Plantiga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-fiction Film*.

⁸ Plantiga, “The Limits of Appropriation,” 133.

⁹ Vaughan, *For Documentary*, 58.

dramatised reconstructions.¹⁰ Chu Yingchi thus concludes that “it is only in the border area of documentary films which includes a large dose of fictionalization, and fiction films which include a large amount of documented material, that we find it difficult to decide”.¹¹ At this point, we should acknowledge that virtually all documentaries participate in the “border area” referred to by Chu, and that this is because fictional strategies – in various forms and to varying degrees, either consciously or unconsciously – are systematically deployed before, during and after the act of filmmaking. As discussed above, formal techniques cannot be the means to operate the distinction, but it is exactly because this is not in their power that their shared use in both fiction and non-fiction practices effectively connects the two realms, and eventually manages to blend and combine them. An extreme instance of this process is then represented by those films for which it is actually “difficult to decide”, and this chapter will address some of these cases.

To describe the structural logic that sustains my argument I will draw on Jacques Derrida’s ‘law of genre’. By advocating “a sort of participating without belonging – a taking part in without being part of”, Derrida claims that, “a text would not belong to any genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging”.¹² What the French philosopher therefore describes is “a law of impurity or a principle of contamination”, a law which – as I contend – applies to the documentary genre as well, and in particular to the kind of allogenic documentaries that will be addressed below.¹³ Hence the purpose of my discussion is neither to draw any clear-cut line between the concepts of ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’, nor to decree whether or not the films under consideration are better classified as documentary. Instead, my aim is to highlight the hybrid status of these works, as this zone of uncertainty is where meaning is most significantly produced.

How does this law of impurity work in the case of documentary? I share Chu’s understanding that “there is no such animal as a documentary without fictionalising or subjectifying elements,”¹⁴ which is qualitatively different from contending that “there is no such thing as documentary” as stated by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Chu thus proceeds to list the major factors that disavow the pretension of pure documentation: the culturally-influenced and historically-situated position of the filmmakers; their aesthetic choices and relation to the filmed object, as well as the latter’s reactions to the filmmaking process; the multiplication of meaning by the audience during the act of film viewing; and the pressures and expectations of the film

¹⁰ Ward, *Documentary*, 30.

¹¹ Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 16.

¹² Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” 227, 230.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁴ Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 16.

industry.¹⁵ It follows that “everything we look at appears to us through some form of *mediation*. Nothing is directly given, not even in human perception”.¹⁶ Mediation - and aesthetic mediation in particular - has long troubled the theorisation of documentary, especially when actual filmmaking practice and the idealistic goals of pure documentation are confronted. John Grierson’s 1935 definition of documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality” entails the sense of a cinematic practice aiming at some form of closeness to reality yet employing aesthetics as a means to understand and (re)present it.¹⁷ Aestheticisation and the idea of representation itself are recurrent concerns in documentary theory as they are deemed guilty of manipulating reality and making the subject less important than its formal appropriation. In line with these preoccupations, Brian Winston states that “the supposition that any ‘actuality’ is left after ‘creative treatment’ can now be seen as being at best naïve and at worst a mark of duplicity”.¹⁸ To me, defining this aesthetic stance as naïve, means sidestepping the core issue at stake, namely what Stella Bruzzi identifies as “the pact between documentary, reality, and the documentary spectator [...] that a documentary will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational”. Bruzzi goes on to argue that “documentary is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim”.¹⁹ It is in this tense balance between different aims, ideals and constraints that fictionalisation manifests itself in documentary. Rephrasing Grierson, Renov sees documentary as “the more or less artful reshaping of the historical world”, in which fictionalisation occurs as “moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention”.²⁰ Significantly, this necessity is a structural one because documentary expression, as with all types of discourses, is dependent on a formal language that is inescapably figurative and connotative. In this sense, “it is not that the documentary *consists* of the structures of filmic fiction (and is, thus, parasitic of its cinematic ‘other’) as it is that ‘fictive’ elements *insist* in documentary as in all film forms”.²¹

Fiction and documentary should thus not be seen as distinct domains, but rather as positions that co-exist in the same field. More specifically, as Linda Williams puts it, documentary makes use of “strategies of fiction for the approach to relative truths,” whereas truth is configured as “the always receding goal of documentary film”.²² Following Derrida, the notion

¹⁵ Ibid., 14-16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14. Original emphasis.

¹⁷ Cited in Rotha, *Documentary Film*, 70.

¹⁸ Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 11.

¹⁹ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 6-7.

²⁰ Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 2.

²¹ Ibid., 10. Original emphasis.

²² Williams, “Mirrors Without Memories,” 72.

of truth does not coincide with the concept of reality in this discussion. Whilst reality is something that simply 'is', truth instead is constructed, partial and contingent (and this is why Williams is precise in his use of the term "relative truths"). Therefore, "once one has distinguished [...] between truth and reality, it immediately follows that truth 'declares itself in a structure of fiction'".²³ The reason for this is the impossibility of truth being a simple reflection or faithful duplication of reality; hence it can only be constructed and conveyed through an act of representation. As Renov suggests, "this is only another way of saying that there is nothing inherently less creative about non-fictional representations, both [fiction and documentary] may create a 'truth' of the text".²⁴ It follows that truth always remains relative and unstable, and the idealistic faith in documentary as a filter-less record of actuality has to be demythified: "no longer ought we as a culture to assume that the preservation and subsequent re-presentation of historical events on film or tape can serve to stabilize or ensure meaning".²⁵ As mentioned above, some critics have decreed that documentary has failed because it has proved unable to get rid of its representational nature: once the camera enters the scene, actuality is filtered through the director's individual perspective and the film's subjects modify their behaviours in response to the camera's presence. Hence, reality is irreparably distorted, and the truth is lost.²⁶ However, this constitutes too negative and unproductive an assessment. In this respect, I agree with Stella Bruzzi, who urges us to "simply accept that a documentary can never be the real world, that the camera never captures life as it would have unravelled had it not interfered and the result of this collision between apparatus and subject [is] what constitutes a documentary". In other words, "documentaries are performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming".²⁷ Following Bruzzi's remarks, represented reality – which expresses a truth of the text – is in fact a proper form of reality, and has to be engaged as such. Moreover, I wish to stress that this truth of the text is significantly meaningful: at the intersection between reality, the medium, and the subjects and makers of the representation, it is the point that collects, filters and processes a complex net of multi-directional meanings.

Furthermore, Bruzzi's critical intervention is especially noteworthy because she understands documentaries as performative acts. How should we understand the term 'performative' in the documentary field? In his well-known categorisation of the six documentary modes, Bill Nichols accounts for the performative as that which "stress[es]

²³ Derrida, *The Post Card*, 467. See in particular the essay "Le Facteur de la Vérité," in which Derrida addresses the concepts of truth and reality in the context of his critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

²⁴ Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶ See, for instance, Barnouw, *Documentary*.

²⁷ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 10.

subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse”.²⁸ This emphasis on the emotional and the affective, memories and personal experiences (i.e. the subjective), undermines the idea of documentary as a factual (i.e. objective) recording of the real, and rather establishes a connection with the audience based more on affect and affinity than on intellect and logic.²⁹ However, Nichols states that, in the performative mode, a work “draws attention to itself”, that is, to the stylistic self-consciousness behind the camera and accordingly relegates the represented real in a subordinate position.³⁰ This bias is shared by other scholars such as Susan Schreiber, for whom documentary performativity relegates reality to the margins by “seduc[ing] us with the promise of the constative, the promise of a plenitude of meaning embodied in a referent,” which is destined to remain an “impossible dream”.³¹ Nichols’ understanding (and that of other scholars after him) appears to be reductive if not even misleading, since such a connotation of the subjective element fails to acknowledge the broader complexity of documentary performativity. In contrast, drawing on scholars such as Judith Butler and J. L. Austin, Bruzzi understands performativity in documentaries as “utterances that simultaneously both describe and perform an action”.³² In other words, Bruzzi accounts for a dialectical relationship that occurs between the events to be depicted and their mode of depiction, a connection that is carried out performatively to finally negotiate a truth of the text. Elaborating on this argument, I suggest considering documentary performativity not simply as a mode among many others, but as an inherent quality in all documentary production. To acknowledge that documentary performativity can be expressed in different forms and to varying degrees – e.g. ‘poetic’ aesthetic choices, reflexivity, interactivity, etc. – one must bypass Nichols’ modal compartmentalisation, and rather understand how different modes can combine and variously relate to each other. In fact, Nichols argues that these modes “overlap and interact” and that “films usually mix different modes although one mode will normally be dominant”.³³ However, Bruzzi laments the lack of flexibility in this proposition, stating that, “heterogeneous documentaries are forced to co-exist, very uncomfortably at times, within one mode”.³⁴ Ward also underlines the insufficiency of dialectical interconnectedness and significantly points out that “it is in the dialectical progression and hybridising of these categories [...] that innovations

²⁸ Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, 95. Nichols’ six modes are the expository, the observational, the performative, the poetic, the interactive or participatory, and the reflexive. The first four documentary modes – the expository, the observational, the interactive and the reflexive – were originally discussed in Nichols’ 1991 volume *Representing Reality*. The scholar then further developed his arguments and listed a total of six modes in his later *Introduction to Documentary* (2001).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 92-106.

³⁰ Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, 97.

³¹ Schreiber, “Constantly Performing the Documentary,” 149.

³² Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 186. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*; and Austin, *Philosophical Papers*.

³³ Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, 95.

³⁴ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 4.

are made”.³⁵ These considerations do not necessarily imply that Nichols’ analysis cannot relate to my investigation. Instead, in order to make the present analysis both complex and specific, I take on Ward’s suggestion to combine Nichols’ study of the characteristics of each individual mode with Bruzzi’s performative argument.³⁶

In this perspective, the filmmaker is thus given centre stage. Authorship has often proved a problematic issue in documentary theory as the author’s intervention is often assumed to invalidate the value of truthfulness in a given film. Instead, given that the real is an unattainable goal even for non-fiction filmmaking, performative documentary maintains that, “the presence of the *auteur* is not so problematic, for one of the corollaries of accepting that documentary cannot but perform the interaction between reality and its representation is the acknowledgement that documentary, like fiction, is authored”.³⁷ This inevitably connects to the question of subjective authenticity addressed in the previous chapters. Bruzzi states that “the fundamental issue here is honesty,” that is, the admission of “the defeat of [documentaries’] utopian aim” and the identification of a new perspective “that does not seek to mask their inherent instability but rather to acknowledge that performance [...] will always be at the heart of the non-fiction film”.³⁸ Going back to *zhenshigan*, the ‘feeling of the real’, we can thus understand how this concept participates in the redefinition of documentary authenticity: it no longer indicates a naturalistic adherence to a reality which is supposed to be fully understandable, but rather a subtle penetration into its emotional undertones and their effect on the author’s subjective sensibility.

To sum up, the positional undecidability of the fiction/non-fiction border, accounted for by invoking Derrida’s law of impurity, has led us to acknowledge the inevitability of mediation not only in fiction but also in documentary filmmaking. This mediation, which is formally expressed by tactics of fictionalisation, aesthetically produces a truth of the text, that is a meaningful product at the intersection between the elusiveness of the real and the agencies of the documentary’s makers and subjects. The truth of the text – whose value of truthfulness is not questioned by its constructed nature – is negotiated in performative terms by the filmmaker who operates at the juncture between reality and its representation. All of these issues will be tackled again in the following case studies, which will be read as allo-genetic developments of the *jishizhuyi* documentary or, as Ward puts it, as a “dialectical progression and hybridising” of

³⁵ Ward, *Documentary*, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28. Other criticisms addressed to Nichols by Stella Bruzzi include the simplistic application of a Darwinian model that should account for the historical development of the modes, but finally resulting in a fake chronology of documentary progress (Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 3-4). Chu Yingchi instead objects Nichols’ analytical approach via the film text itself, thus without a careful consideration of its contextual framework (Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 26).

³⁷ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 197. Original emphasis.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

this style. However, before dealing with their analysis, the Chinese context will be addressed in detail.

1.2 MEDIATED XIANCHANG

In her study of Chinese documentaries, Chu Yingchi places the development of non-fiction filmmaking in the PRC within a historical perspective. Documentaries have been produced since the inception of cinematic art in China. These first examples mainly relied on principles of traditional social morality and didactic narrativity to reveal a documentary truth (*zhenshi*) in line with Confucian ethics.³⁹ After the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949, documentaries progressively adopted what Chu defines as the 'dogmatic style', i.e. the product of authoritarian cultural policies aiming at political propaganda. Stylistically, the dogmatic documentary displays voice-of-God narration, artificial studio lighting, and an absence of location sounds and interviews or, more generally, of any spoken word directly emitted by the subjects. Dogmatic documentaries thus participate in what Bill Nichols defines as the expository mode, in which the commentary is the key element of the film and images function as a mere visual description of what is said rhetorically.⁴⁰ In the dogmatic period, which Chu dates from 1949 to 1977, truth coincided with government policy: as typical in Maoist revolutionary art, social reality was then in turn supposed to reflect the truth of this policy.⁴¹ The documentary practice underwent significant transformations during the Reform Period as a specific sub-genre of television documentary, the *zhuantipian* (special topic documentary), stood out as the most significant non-fiction form of the time. Although still displaying remnants of the dogmatic style, namely a top-down narration in which the voiceover explanation is still more important than the images, the *zhuantipian* introduced interactive and observational tactics, reduced stage shooting, made use of location sounds and interviews, and therefore expressed alternative voices – a milestone in this sense was the 1988 documentary TV series *River Elegy (Heshang)*.⁴² Crucial in the gradual dismissal of the dogmatic formula, the *zhuantipian* presented a different acknowledgment of the relation between documentary and truth: enlivened by an unprecedented will to investigate actual reality, "now truth is what is in front of us in society and therefore identical to the social objectivities to be documented".⁴³ However, its largely scripted structure and overall

³⁹ Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 39-52.

⁴⁰ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 34-38.

⁴¹ Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 53-87.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 87-91.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 215.

configuration as an illustrated lecture limited the formal innovation of *zhuantipian* and anchored its vision to the tenets of the dogmatic proposition.

This limitation unveiled a fundamental issue for the following generation of documentary filmmakers: the problem of mediation, namely, the relation between the subject and the mode of its representation. This question arose within a broader wave of redefinition – both theoretical and practical – of documentary filmmaking in China. This reassessment was favoured by the emergence of new conditions in the postsocialist era: the rejection of dogmatic works by the national distribution system and the need to produce documentaries for Western markets; filmmakers’ increasing acquaintance with Western cinematic forms; a reinvigorated scholarly interest in a critical reconsideration of the Chinese film tradition; and, finally, the progressive decline of the association between documentary and the political establishment.⁴⁴ Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, Chu describes Chinese documentary production since the 1990s in terms of polyphony, i.e. “many-voiced film[s] offer[ing] a rich diversity of *opposing* positions which the film viewer must negotiate in order to constitute a socially realistic picture”.⁴⁵ In the spirit of a “polyphonic heterogeneity”, also expressed by the growing adoption of the interactive/participatory mode, these works aim to question the idea that there is only one single truthful representation of reality (as in dogmatic documentaries and *zhuantipian*) and rather express alternative perspectives hitherto unheard in both public and private discourses.⁴⁶

In their commitment to social actualities, these polyphonic works aim to limit editorial manipulations; that is, they confront the issue of mediation by attempting a virtual elimination of it. In particular, this is the case for the so-called New Documentary Film Movement, a wave of independent documentaries that have emerged in China since the 1990s, whose *jishizhuyi* aesthetics was addressed in chapter 3. The observational stance that these documentaries aim to display is usually interpreted politically as a form of resistance against the government propaganda that still subsists in the *zhuantipian*. Here instead “the emphasis on objectivity and truth [...] inevitably links with concepts of democracy, open society and freedom of speech”.⁴⁷ The concept of truth as a quality inherent in the unvarnished real, devoid of any ideological falsification, and feasible for the camera to capture, is central to these filmmakers’ cinematic approach. For Zhu Qingjiang and Mei Bin this is because “in the past we had faced too many lies [so now] what we want to do is to seek the truth to understand what really happened”.⁴⁸ In opposition to dogmatic films and *zhuantipian*, documentaries now “must contain the idea of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37. Original emphasis.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 126, 24-25.

⁴⁷ Situ, “Zhongguo jilupian chuanzuo qianzhan,” 186. See also Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*.

⁴⁸ Zhu and Mei, *Zhongguo duli jilupian dang’an*, 18. More specifically, Zhu and Mei make this point with reference to the use of interviews in Chinese independent documentaries.

truth,” according to Jing Xiuming.⁴⁹ But how can this ‘idea of truth’ be expressed in non-fiction filmmaking? Tao Tao points out three elements that in his view characterise the ‘documentary spirit’: the faithful recording of history, the truthful representation of actuality, and an encouragement to express critical judgments.⁵⁰ This concern with the formation of a critical discourse is particularly interesting as it breaks away from the dogmatic tradition and any association between truth and government propaganda. However, in the critical debate, the formulation of what a ‘faithful recording of history’ and a ‘truthful representation of actuality’ exactly entail appears to be contradictory. In line with Western theorisations of direct cinema and similar anti-Griersonian positions, Xiao Ping contends that, “documentary is not a creative treatment of actuality,” but a contingent practice aiming to “record an action or event that cannot be repeated”.⁵¹ Jing Xiuming follows this line by arguing that documentary must exclude any form of fictionalisation, but then describes non-fiction filmmaking as a process that aims to “describe or reconstruct” reality.⁵²

From an observational perspective, I see a contradiction between the idea of ‘describing’ and that of ‘reconstructing’ reality. However, the connection between the two terms regains consistence if understood within a performative framework. Independent documentaries advocate minimisation of the filmmaker’s presence and avoidance of participatory techniques (such as interviews). However, as discussed in chapter 3, drawing on Wang Qi’s argument, a series of interactive and other non-observational elements can actually be detected, and this allows for effectively accounting for these works as performative.⁵³ This position can be further substantiated if we connect Jing Xiuming’s argument with Bruzzi’s aforementioned definition of performative documentaries as “utterances that simultaneously both describe and perform an action”. In this perspective, an idea of truth as ideologically unvarnished and immediately describable is no longer tenable. Moreover, not all Chinese critics have wholeheartedly embraced such a critical assessment. Zhong Danian, for instance, defines truth as “a myth about actuality,” and suggests adopting the term “sincerity” (*zhengcheng*) instead. In his understanding, the faithful rendering of actuality is not the point in documentary filmmaking; the goal is rather to reflect on reality and express value judgments on it.⁵⁴ Lü Xinyu further adds that what is conveyed in documentary is not reality, but the filmmaker’s interpretation of it based on his/her subjectivity.⁵⁵ This latter position is thus consistent with my broader argument of *zhenshiguan*

⁴⁹ Jin, *Jilu de mofang*, 7.

⁵⁰ Tao, *Dianshi jilupian chuanguo*, 36.

⁵¹ Xiao, *Jilupian biandao shijian lilun*, 1.

⁵² Jin, *Jilu de mofang*, 7.

⁵³ Wang, “Performing Documentation.”

⁵⁴ Zhong, *Jilupian chuanguo lungang*, 44.

⁵⁵ Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*, 262.

and contributes to shifting the emphasis from an unattainable truth of actuality to a contested truth of the (documentary) text itself.

In his detailed analysis of Chinese independent documentary, Luke Robinson also highlights the inescapable mediation inherent in documentary filmmaking. Within the broader process of diversification or pluralisation (*duoyuanhua*) of cultural production in the postsocialist period, Robinson illustrates the turn from self-professed observational documentaries – which he names public (*gonggong*) documentaries – to works that “are as ‘performative’ and ‘reflexive’ as they are ‘observational’,” thus showing an increasing inclination towards stylistic experimentation. He defines the latter as personal (*geren*) or private (*siren*) documentaries.⁵⁶ Although Robinson clarifies that this distinction is not absolute and the two modes should be better understood “as different points on a spectrum” allowing “the possibility of ‘mixed’ genres,” their difference is presented in terms of a different managing of contingency, a concept already addressed as the ‘unexpected’ or the ‘unpredictable’ in chapter 3.⁵⁷ Exemplified by early independent non-fiction works such as Wu Wenguang’s *Bumming in Beijing*, Wang Guangli’s *I Graduated!* and Duan Jinchuan’s *No. 16 Barkhor South Street* (*Bakuo nanjie shiliu hao*, 1997), public documentaries tackle topics of collective relevance. Despite the filmmakers’ observational ideals, Robinson demonstrates how these works “reduce the absolute contingency of the profilmic by introducing a structural formalization [...] to convey directorial understanding”. Aiming at “semiotic coherence,” public documentaries thus favour “diegetic stability” over profilmic extradiegetic contingency, and assert this control mainly from the editing suite.⁵⁸ In this sense, as Dai Jinhua comments with regard to *Bumming in Beijing*, the *xianchanggan* – the ‘sense of being on the scene’ – is given more by an emotional ‘feeling of closeness’ (*pojingan*) to the represented subjects than by the formal characteristics of the work.⁵⁹ Epitomised by intimate and personal (mostly digital) works such as Zhang Ming’s *Springtime in Wushan* (*Wushan zhi chun*, 2003), Hu Xinyu’s *The Man* (*Nanren*, 2003), and Huang Weikai’s *Floating* (*Piao*, 2005), private documentaries focus on the partial and the particular, establishing both the maker and his/her subjects as performative agents within the documentary. According to Robinson, unlike public documentaries, the contingent is the central element that shapes the film’s development in this case: it “takes precedence over closing down and interpreting” and “filmmakers [...] place far less emphasis on containing [...] than on foregrounding it”. Such a valorisation of the unexpected, however, does not erase the presence of the filmmaker; rather, his/her visual or aural position becomes a predominant characteristic

⁵⁶ Robinson *Chinese Independent Documentary*, 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 51-56. My analysis, leading to comparable conclusions, is presented in chapter 3.

⁵⁹ Dai, *Yinxing shuxie*, 225.

in private documentaries. Hence, *xianchang* is not only temporally and spatially bounded, but also socially and interactively negotiated by the performance of the filmmaker and his/her represented subjects.⁶⁰

To sum up, in light of Robinson's analysis, mediation in Chinese non-fiction works produced since the 1990s is primarily a matter of formal intervention, in the case of public documentaries, and of performative establishment of the filmmaker within the scene, in the case of private documentaries. Accordingly, the conclusion is that "*xianchang* cannot simply be concerned with the *immediate*; it is necessarily implicated in the *mediate*" and it "is a product of this very process".⁶¹ In this sense, *xianchang* is to be understood as a representational practice "effected through the process of mediation, rather than via mediation's effacement".⁶² Therefore, I suggest that *xianchang* should more appropriately be redefined as the *performance* of being on the scene. Elaborating on the arguments developed in chapter 3, I contend that filmmakers have gradually expressed an increasing awareness of this performative value and, more generally, of the unavoidable occurrence of mediation. Hence, they exploit the potential of various types of performativity (poetic-formal, interactive, and reflexive – to adopt Nichols' terminology) to reflect on the ways in which mediation – and its stylistic crystallisation in certain aesthetic features – can actually produce meaning by conveying a truth of the text. By commenting on the "intrusive approach" of pro-active filmmakers manipulating their subjects in the context of self-indulgent private documentaries, Yomi Braester states that "directorial intervention is [...] motivated by the filmmakers' conception of themselves as auteurs, not simply in the sense of stressing their vision, but more specifically exercising authorship by being present in their films and even confronting and inconveniencing their subjects".⁶³ By acknowledging the increasing relevance of stylisation and aestheticisation in contemporary Chinese cinema, I would stress that in fact, for these filmmakers, the issue of emphasising their own cinematic vision is not of subordinate importance, as Braester implies. Bruzzi maintains that, since the 1990s, worldwide, "what has occurred (and performative documentaries are at the forefront of this) is a shift towards more self-consciously 'arty' and expressive mode of documentary filmmaking".⁶⁴ In this sense, Chinese non-fiction filmmaking aligns with a more global tendency. Scholars of Chinese cinema such as Jason McGrath tend to interpret this alignment with the transnational film scene in negative terms, namely, as a calculated reliance

⁶⁰ Robinson *Chinese Independent Documentary*, 57-73, 109. See also Lü, "Xin jilu yundong de li yu tong," 15-16.

⁶¹ Robinson *Chinese Independent Documentary*, 30-31. Original emphasis. Philip Auslander and Nick Couldry have suggested similar viewpoints concerning the concept of 'liveness', Anglophone counterpart of *xianchang*. See Auslander, *Liveness*; Couldry, *Media Rituals*.

⁶² Robinson *Chinese Independent Documentary*, 150.

⁶³ Braester, "Excuse Me, Your Camera Is in My Face," 196.

⁶⁴ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 197.

on empty formalism to achieve international recognition.⁶⁵ In contrast, as has already been made clear in the previous chapters, my aim is to read these stylistic efforts positively in order to understand how they connect transversally to a number of post-national issues. Moreover, my analysis aims to highlight how they contribute to the evolution of the *jishizhuyi* style as well as its production of meaning.

To conclude, the following case studies will present some possible allo-genetic ramifications in the development of the *jishizhuyi* documentary aesthetics. The theoretical questions discussed earlier, as well as the overall arguments of this dissertation, will be tested against a number of recent Chinese films that do not always conform to a conventional definition of documentary. The reasons I have chosen to address hybrid non-fictional forms are varied. First of all, the purpose of this chapter is not only to describe stylistic developments occurring within non-fictional production, but also, and most crucially, to investigate the characteristics of a hybrid form of realist filmmaking in which the border between fact and fiction is continuously negotiated. Hence my aim is to employ documentary theory flexibly to reflect more extensively on realist filmmaking in general and to explore the ontological limits of both fiction and non-fiction filmmaking. Finally, but no less importantly, this is also an attempt to suggest an expanded definition of contemporary documentary, not necessarily as an observational practice, but as a hybrid cinematic form deploying a full set of expressive features with the unchanged objective of giving account of reality.

2. CASE STUDIES

2.1 DISORDER

Following its premiere in 2009, *Disorder* by Huang Weikai - a 58-minute documentary - took the art film festival scene by storm. Winning widespread critical acclaim, the film has been praised for its unconventional aesthetics that starkly depart from the preceding trend of Chinese independent documentary, both public and private.

Disorder is a collage of life fragments in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou: scenes of car accidents, traffic disruption, working-class neighbourhoods hit by flooding, an alienated man dancing in the middle of the street, pigs on the run on a highway, garbage floating on a polluted river and a small alligator found in the same waters. And also: construction sites threatening ancient artefacts, a suicidal man on a bridge, tourists visiting a temple, a new-born

⁶⁵ See McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 129-64; and "The New Formalism."

baby found in a landfill site, fires erupting in the city, a dirigible crossing the sky, a cat torturing a mouse, and violent clashes with the police.⁶⁶ Notably, this footage was not shot by the director himself, but acquired from a number of amateur videographers: the credits list eight names in this respect, plus another two under the heading 'additional footage'. As for Huang, he reportedly included "fewer than three scenes that [he shot himself], all of which are empty shots [...] used mainly for editing".⁶⁷ With regard to this process of image acquisition, Huang explains that:

These hobbyists would just shoot with DV cameras for the sake of shooting. They'd often forget what they had filmed, or simply feel that the footage they had compiled was of no value... After watching some of the footage, I was astonished by the things they documented, so at the time I came up with the idea for *Disorder*. Because I had watched hours and hours of their footage, I got the idea to use a collage method to expose another side of the city. There were so many different perspectives revealed in their footage that showed the absurd side of life in this city.⁶⁸

Selected from over a thousand hours of footage, the images were then daringly fragmented and jarringly juxtaposed, with Huang – who is credited as 'director and editor' – abiding by one single rule: no scene must be taken from the same tape as the previous one.⁶⁹ No inter-title, off-screen narration or interview is deployed to make sense of what we see; there are just visual fragments that are rhythmically organised on screen by means of fast-paced editing. In the first ten minutes – working as a sort of prologue before the appearance of the film title – the interconnected episodic structure is somehow more discernible, possibly due to the limited number of scenes presented and the editing that proceeds at a relatively controlled pace: a busted fire hydrant obstructs the traffic flow; a man run over by a car attempts to bribe the driver; frozen bear pawns and anteaters are discovered in a local shop; a man finds a cockroach in his noodle soup; and angry suppliers take their goods back from an insolvent supermarket. However, as new narrative fragments are introduced and the editing rhythm speeds up, the disconnected elements combine to shape a nightmarish portrait of a city relentlessly degenerating into chaos. The disorienting feeling stemming from the impossibility of keeping track of the several narrative threads is further magnified by an audio-visual

⁶⁶ Zhang Zhen points out three sets of motifs that inform the film's fragmented narrative: water (seen as menacing and poisoning), counterfeit (underlining a lack of legal and social order), and animals (always held in captivity and cruelly treated). See Zhang, "Dream-Walking in Digital Wasteland," 310-14.

⁶⁷ Wang, "CinemaTalk."

⁶⁸ Shaffer, "The Films of Huang Weikai."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

displacement that grows increasingly radical as the film unfolds. Avoiding any extra-diegetic soundtrack, *Disorder* relies exclusively on natural sounds, but these are edited asynchronously, meaning that the images and sounds often do not coincide, adding to the overall alienating and bewildering effect of the film. As Paul Brunick effectively puts it: "Through plausibly contiguous juxtapositions and false sound bridges, the editing constructs a directionless, drifting trajectory through an apocalyptic urban nightmare: Benjamin's flâneur strolling through a Brueghelian hellscape".⁷⁰

A second stylistic feature that distinctively characterises *Disorder* is the film's grainy black-and-white outlook. Huang gives two main reasons for this visual choice

The first is because the footage came from different [digital] cameras, the quality and colours vary and therefore they need a unified style. Another reason is I used to learn Chinese ink painting and therefore prefer presenting pictures in black and white. I made quite a lot of adjustment in the black and white pictures as well. For example, I enhanced the contrast and turned almost all the skies in the city into pure white. Some of the original footage is grainy and some is not. I turned them all into the grainy ones in the final film.⁷¹

Besides the transvergent and inter-medial connection between Huang's background in traditional painting and his current documentary activity, what appears particularly interesting with regard to the arguments previously discussed is the deliberate manipulation of the digital image. On the one hand, this connects to the debate about the digital medium tackled in chapter 3, but more precisely, it pertinently contributes to the wider concerns about documentary ontology informing the present chapter. Drawing on Bruno Latour's description of scientific instruments as 'inscription devices', Brian Winston contends that the scientific objectivity supposedly entailed in the process of image production is an illusion. In fact, as DV is increasingly chosen as the favourite medium for documentary filmmaking, the "mimetic status of the photographic image" is challenged as the fixed relationship between reality and its documentary representation is fundamentally transgressed.⁷² Huang's direct intervention in the documentary image reveals scepticism regarding the 'unvarnished real' and its capacity to convey the urgency of contemporary times. Accordingly, the filmmaker aesthetically intervenes in the representation of reality to convey his subjective understanding of it. More specifically, as suggested by Zhang Zhen, through his "deliberate harnessing of the monochromatic," Huang

⁷⁰ Brunick, "Crowd-Sourcing Creation," 44.

⁷¹ Mudge, "Interview." Huang discusses the same point in Wang, "CinemaTalk." In this latter, he further distinguishes the two reasons and connotes one as objective (the different quality of the raw footage) and the other as subjective (his background in traditional painting).

⁷² Winston, "The Documentary as Scientific Inscription," 41.

aims at “defamiliarizing the present and reclaiming truth”.⁷³ But what does “defamiliarizing the present” imply? And what ‘truth’ is to be reclaimed?

Following Nichols, *Disorder* can be understood within the poetic mode, in that it foregrounds “mood, tone, and affect” and highlights “subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations” by splitting spatiotemporal relations into “multiple perspectives”.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Benjamin Shaffer sees a connection between this film and the surrealist practice, especially regarding “the blurring of waking and dreaming states, and the interpenetration of image and language to yield a system of unstable meaning”.⁷⁵ Shaffer’s suggestion appears consistent as Paul Ward, more generally, underlines how poetic documentaries are linked to modernist and avant-garde movements due to their foregrounding of fragmented subjectivities: “rather than the apparent ‘certainties’ of expository and observational films, there is often an emphasis on the ambiguities of experience, and this can be seen as a form of commentary on the epistemological bases of documentary as a whole”.⁷⁶ However, whilst the film’s overall aim is to generate meaning through the author’s explicit mediation, it would be reductive to understand *Disorder* as an example of formal excess that downplays the significance of the real. In order to understand how *Disorder* sets up an expressive strategy in which aesthetic interventions and contingent events communicate profitably, I thus find it more useful to consider the film in performative terms.

Wang Yiman argues that, “experiencing and witnessing do not always contradict performance [...] if performance is understood as [...] making visible what is deemed too commonplace or too abject to be noteworthy or newsworthy”.⁷⁷ This point looks clearer if we look at the unstable nature of the images shown in the film. Although at times violent, shocking and bizarre, the events portrayed in *Disorder* can hardly be classified as exceptional in absolute terms (with possibly a few exceptions). However, with Huang’s aesthetic treatment, images of metropolitan dysfunction lose their everyday quality and, as the filmmaker suggests in the passage quoted above, look increasingly absurd. As the viewer grows increasingly disoriented amidst the mounting flow of audio-visual stimuli, “the film becomes a kind of surrealist urban ethnography” in which images turns into “hallucinations surfacing in the liminal space between dream and reality”.⁷⁸ Recalling a similar statement made by Jia Zhangke, Huang states that this “film showed the absurdity of city life. The news we read every day is always more ‘amazing’

⁷³ Zhang, “Dream-Walking in Digital Wasteland,” 304.

⁷⁴ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 103.

⁷⁵ Shaffer, “The Films of Huang Weikai.” Cf. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*.

⁷⁶ Ward, *Documentary*, 14.

⁷⁷ Wang, “‘I Am One of Them’ and ‘They Are My Actors’,” 220.

⁷⁸ Shaffer, “The Films of Huang Weikai.”

than a novel or movie”.⁷⁹ Therefore, by noticing how the filmmaker projects his subjective gaze on the city’s everyday reality and how black-and-white shots are continuously “dispersed [...] and deconstructed and reconstructed”, Zhang Zhen finally suggests that the film does not “build up towards a realist representation,” but rather “push[es] back and forth the sliding door between naturalism, realism and surrealism”.⁸⁰ Indeed *Disorder* does not point to a strict realist representation, if by this we mean a conventional or *jishizhuyi* realist treatment. Instead, the film perfectly participates in the definition of a reconfigured realism: reality is approached through formal aestheticisation and the ‘truth’ is the truth of the text, namely a set of meanings that exist at the intersection between reality and the filmmaker’s subjectivity.

However, in light of the stylistic features hitherto discussed, the issue of authorship in *Disorder* cannot be quickly dismissed by referring to an individual (Huang’s) subjectivity. Borrowing the words of Zhang Zhen, the film is in fact “embedded in an experimental collaborative amateur authorship and a palimpsestual mode of representation” in which “the film-maker unabashedly redefines his directorial position as parasitic and co-extensive with the multi-perspectival collective vision of the ubiquitous amateur shooters”.⁸¹ This notably sets up a shifting and unstable *xianchang* perspective, in which the presence of the director (Huang) constantly negotiates its agency. In fact, Huang seemingly ‘disappears’ into the observational stance of the videographers’ images just to simultaneously reappear in order to arrange the fragments and make sense of their contingency. This authorial position expresses Huang’s cinematic performance and makes the film a relevant example of post-production performativity. Hence, as is typical of the stylistic strategy of allogenetically-modified realism, the partial perspective of observational *jishizhuyi* is discarded in an attempt to convey a more comprehensive vision of reality, which is pursued via aesthetic means.

This updated version of realism thus leads us to appreciate the transvergent value of *Disorder*. As Zhang Zhen suggests by comparing *Disorder*’s use of black-and-white with previous Chinese examples (including Huang Jianxin’s 1986 *Black Cannon Incident / Heipao shijian* and Wang Xiaoshuai’s 1993 *The Days*), a new stylistic attitude is at work here which aims to “redefine the status and meaning of artwork and artist in the digital era”.⁸² This redefinition, first of all, should be assessed in the light of the previous trends of Chinese (independent) documentary to see how *Disorder* connects and simultaneously disconnects itself from the *jishizhuyi* of both public and private non-fiction works. In this respect, on the one hand, the filmed materials

⁷⁹ Mudge, “Interview.” Cf. Jia Zhangke cited in Lu, “Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism,” 126: “I have the impression that a surrealist atmosphere prevails in China today, because the entire society faces an enormous pressure to speed up [...] As they say, ‘reality is more exceptional than fiction’”.

⁸⁰ Zhang, “Dream-Walking in Digital Wasteland,” 312. 316.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 304.

convey the absolute contingency of the events and the shooting conditions. In this way, *Disorder* relates to the structural extemporaneity of private documentaries and, more generally, to the principle of spontaneity that characterises the *jishizhuyi* practice. On the other hand, however, for all of the rhythmic editing and colour grading, “a controlling authorial vision implicitly emerges” that keeps hold of the whole work.⁸³ Accordingly, the director keeps the disruptive contingency of the events under control by arranging and systematising images and sounds in order to convey his own subjective understanding. Therefore, it is a link with the formal vision of public documentaries that more pertinently manifests the allogenic development of the style. However, whilst in public documentaries the director’s intervention is limited to a minimum in order to preserve the observational spirit of the enterprise, in this case the filmmaker mediates considerably: he gives up any pretension of transparent observation and ensures that he clearly expresses his personal authorial vision. Hence, by relying on practices of formal mediation, the representation of reality rejects the *jishizhuyi* assumptions of spontaneity and objectivity in favour of an aestheticised interpretation that claims its authenticity through its value of subjectivity.

Moreover, it should be noted how *Disorder* distances itself from another relevant trend in Chinese contemporary art-house cinema, namely the long-take convention, which the film disregards through a restless fast-paced editing. This observation enables the unearthing of a second level of transvergence informing the film, that is, its transnational connections with a number of non-Chinese films and cinematic traditions. Both for the choice of a dizzying editing style and the focus on city life, *Disorder* has been often compared to the tradition of the ‘city symphony’, exemplified by works such as Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, 1927) and Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, 1929).⁸⁴ Consistent with the stylistic proposition of the city symphonies but closer in time, another parallel can be set with Godfrey Reggio’s ‘Qatsi trilogy’ – *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (1982), *Powaqqatsi: Life in Transformation* (1988), and *Naqoysqatsi: Life as War* (2002) – in which an impressive array of images of natural and artificial environments from all over the world is edited in a fast-paced and fragmented manner to investigate the evolving relationships between humans, nature and technology, and to provocatively build up “a postmodern denunciation of the culture of postmodernism”.⁸⁵ Huang reportedly took inspiration from this cinematic trend but, to better serve his expressive purposes, consciously updated it to finally create what he defines as “a city symphony of my

⁸³ Brunick, “Crowd-Sourcing Creation,” 44.

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Beckett, “City Scherzos and Huang Weikai’s *Disorder*” and Shaffer, “The Films of Huang Weikai”.

⁸⁵ Solomon, “Our Decentered Culture,” 37.

own".⁸⁶ Discussing his understanding of the city symphony tradition and its shortcomings, Huang states:

None of the previous city symphony documentaries [...] seemed to feature the voice of reality, like Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin Symphony* [sic], Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* and Godfrey Reggio's [*Koyaanisqatsi*:] *Life Out of Balance*. The first two films were made in the silent film era, and the last one uses electronic music. This time, now in the DV era, I told myself I could not use a soundtrack. Now this city symphony is mixed with various sounds and episodes. I knitted them together like knitting a sweater, with the design and style of the current age.

In Huang's understanding, the updating of this cinematic tradition is to be performed through a different management of sound, that is by avoiding the musical score (the orchestral arrangements of the silent films or the electronic music of Reggio's works) and opting instead for the diegetic sounds of the actual city. Huang conceives this choice as an attempt to stick closer to reality, while paradoxically creating an alienating sense of bewilderment for all the non-linear sound and image editing shown in the film. Reality and its absurd sides thus proceed hand in hand, giving account of the surreal dimension of a city (and more generally of a country) facing radical transformations and dramatic social ruptures. Notably, the use of natural sounds is a transvergent element that allogenetically connects *Disorder* with its *jishizhuyi* roots: on the one hand, it is grounded in the characteristic *jishizhuyi* practice of on-location synchronous sound recording; and, on the other hand, the technique is aesthetically reinvented by means of asynchronous sound editing that often degenerates into pure acoustic chaos. Given this particular sound treatment, we can thus more appropriately define *Disorder* as an 'anti-city symphony' or, as Paul Brunick calls it, a "city cacophony".⁸⁷ In addition, Brunick also acknowledges the differences between Huang's use of city images and the traditional visual logic of classic city symphonies. With reference to *Man with a Movie Camera*, he describes *Disorder* as a "hypnotically entropic counterpoint to Vertov's orderly utopia" in which the "formal density of Vertov's thematic analogies" is contrasted by the "surreal randomness" of Huang's editing.⁸⁸

Finally, I wish to point out one last transvergent connection, namely that linking *Disorder* to the recent trend of crowd-sourced films such as Kevin McDonald's *Life in a Day* (2011) and *Christmas in a Day* (2013). Ideally developing from Reggio's pioneering documentaries, *Life in a Day* collected video fragments shot by volunteers from all over the world on the same single day

⁸⁶ Mudge, "Interview."

⁸⁷ Brunick, "Crowd-Sourcing Creation," 44.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

(24 July 2010). Similarly, *Christmas in a Day* compiled a series of videos shot by a number of amateur videographers within the United Kingdom during the 2012 holiday season. The main differences between *Disorder* and these films lie in the broader geographical focus of the latter, as well as in their temporal constraints. Untied from the globalising subtext of *Life in a Day* and from the national perspective of *Christmas in a Day*, *Disorder* presents a more challenging cinematic vision, which is not limited to a compilation of images but rather seeks to produce meaning through aesthetic manipulation. However, although their expressive purposes may vary, it is interesting to notice how a shared reconsideration of the role of the auteur-director informs these works. On the one hand, these films testify to the increasing democratisation of the cinematic image in the DV era; and, on the other hand, by displacing the authorial subject, they critically subvert the author-centred assumptions of the classic *politique des auteurs*.

2.2 24 CITY

24 City is possibly Jia Zhangke's most stylistically controversial project to date. Upon the film's premiere at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, commentators found it hard to categorise the film within ready-made critical labels because of its distinctive blend of fiction and non-fiction, and its overall aesthetic complexity.

The film is centred on the history of the Chengfa Group – also known as Factory 420 – a state-owned plant founded in Chengdu in 1958 for the manufacture of military aircraft, and later converted - in the late 1970s – for the production of consumer appliances. In 2006, the factory site was sold to a private developer who gradually demolished it to make space for a luxury apartment complex. Concerned about the loss of historical memories, both public and private, Jia Zhangke interviewed more than one hundred former Chengfa workers with the purpose of making a documentary based on their oral histories.⁸⁹ The final work is composed of eight interviews that pertain to two different levels of reality: fiction and non-fiction. Four are with real former workers and other people associated with the factory: He Xikun, born in 1948 in Chengdu, who was a fitter in the factory, remembers the idealist teachings of his supervisor Master Wang and meets him after many years; Guan Fengjiu, born in 1935 in Haicheng (Liaoning), who was head of security, recounts the story of the factory's relocation in the 1950s from its original site in the North-East, and mentions its flourishing business during wartime; Hou Lijun, born in 1953 in Shenyang (Liaoning), who was a repairwoman, tells her moving private story, from her childhood in Chengdu, far from her family, to her current economic hardship

⁸⁹ Wu, "Time, History, and Memory in Jia Zhangke's '24 City'," 7; Dudley, "Interview with Jia Zhang-ke," 81.

after being made redundant from the factory, because of its decreasing business; Zhao Gang, born in 1974, the son of factory workers, now a news round-up presenter on the local Chengdu TV, gives voice to the changing aspirations of the new generations for whom working in a factory is no longer a desirable employment as it was during the Maoist years. The remaining four interviews complicate the ontological status of *24 City*. Four actors, embodying fictional characters, perform interviews scripted by the director and his co-writer, poetess Zhai Yongming: Hao Dali (played by Lü Liping) remembers the tragic loss of her child on her way from Shenyang to Chengdu; Song Weidong (played by Chen Jianbin), born in 1966, assistant to the general manager, uncovers childhood memories and recollections of his first love; Gu Minhua (played by Joan Chen), born in Shanghai in 1958, a quality inspector and the most sought after woman in the factory, tells of her solitude and of the difficulties she encountered in looking for a man and a new job; Su Na (played by Zhao Tao), born in 1982, the daughter of factory workers, embodies the hedonism of the younger generations but also shows her filial piety in that she plans to buy a flat for her parents in the '24 City', the apartment complex that is under construction.

Jia Zhangke treats the fictional characters as if they were real, placing the two orders of reality on the same level. This suggests that the fictional interviewees have to be considered to be as real as the non-fictional ones, since what they say is no less indicative of the reality under scrutiny than the words of the real workers. Jia carries out this equalisation by adopting several strategies. Visually, he frames all of the interviewees in the same position, mostly within the empty spaces of the factory that is being demolished: they are all framed in medium shots, sitting and leaning slightly to one side of the frame, facing the director, who, off screen, listens to their stories. More significantly, in both the real and the fictional interviews, Jia participates in the dialogue and directs the conversation by asking questions and making comments. Finally, as for the real workers, biographical inter-titles are displayed to provide basic information about all of the fictional characters: name, age, birthplace, role in the factory, and main career details. This choice powerfully strengthens the historical concreteness of the characters and significantly provides them with an almost factual identity. The only difference between the inter-titles of the real workers and those of the fictional characters lies in a minor graphic notation that nonetheless underlines the latter's constructedness: with the exception of Song Weidong, the fictional characters' names appear on screen altered from the standard form, either by the omission of their family name (e.g. only "Dali" instead of Hao Dali) or by simply showing their nickname (e.g. "Xiao Hua" for Gu Minhua, "Nana" for Su Na).

The fictional characters also fulfil a narrative purpose as they add historical details that are missing or not thoroughly expressed in the real interviews. Thereby we discover that Factory 420 was a state secret that played a vital role during wartime, and this is why there was always

plenty of food even during periods of famine (Hao Dali); the factory was a world apart from the real Chengdu, a self-contained city within the city with all of the facilities needed by its inhabitants (Song Weidong); and, the diminishing business of the plant after the end of the Vietnam War led to its conversion for the production of goods for popular consumption such as fridges and washing machines (Gu Minhua). By inserting facts acquired from different sources during the preparatory research phase into the four fictional interviews, Jia Zhangke structures the fictional characters as agents of synthesis revealing a condensed documentary truth: they synthesise different aspects of reality in one single expressive feature, activated through the film's aesthetic configuration to convey a meaningful interpretation of the real. In this sense, they have the same value as the magic(al) elements discussed in the previous chapter.

Among the fictional characters, Gu Minhua (played by Joan Chen) is the one who best represents the complex and multi-layered sophistication of Jia's work. Epitomising the film's conceptual effort, this character deploys multiple orders of reality that are enunciated through her multiple fictional and non-fictional identities. Following the on-screen inter-title, the character is first presented with her nickname, Xiao Hua. Later, during the interview, the director-interviewer asks her "What is your real name?" and she replies "Gu Minhua", thus deepening the film's ontological status by adding a second level of reality/identity. Hence, to explain why people started calling her Xiao Hua, the character activates a meta-cinematic short-circuit that leads the non-fictional reality and the several fictional realities to implode into one another: Gu Minhua, played by actress Joan Chen, is nicknamed Xiao Hua after her factory colleagues notice a physical resemblance to the character Xiao Hua, the heroine of the popular film *Little Flower* (*Xiao Hua*, Chang Tseng and Huang Jianzhong, 1980) played by the young Joan Chen herself. Visually, this identity puzzle is reinforced by an excerpt from the original film, broadcast on TV in a later scene.

Other narrative and visual choices further contribute to sharpening the director's purpose. First, Gu Minhua is interviewed in a hair salon. She is shown painting her lips and walking dressed in a traditional theatre costume. The symbolism of the make-up parallels a reflection on the representation of the self, of its performance and mise-en-scene, and is further magnified by the presence of a mirror behind her, which further multiplies her already-multiplied image/identity.⁹⁰ Then, while remembering how the factory women used to fantasise over the picture of a national hero, Gu Minhua states: "How can you match a living person with a photo?" This statement clearly bears a wider relevance within the representational scheme of the film. Hence, besides the playfulness of the self-reflexive device, this meta-cinematic

⁹⁰ Another fictional character, Su Na, played by Zhao Tao, is portrayed while making up in front of a mirror.

mechanism generates a dialogue between the various levels of reality to reflect on the fundamental concern of the film: the concept of representation, and of realist and documentary representation in particular. Multiple identities, different orders of reality, meta-cinematic effects and mirrors are employed not only to increase the sense of (non)fictional deception, but also to critically investigate what constitutes the real and the implications of its representation. *24 City* pushes and breaks the boundaries of conventional documentary filmmaking, and sets up a dialogue between fiction and non-fiction, documentary and the cinematic real. Jia's act of talking to the fictional characters, in particular, embodies the utmost cinematic aim of the film: to put the real in direct conversation with the fictional image, unmediated within and in spite of the inescapable mediation of the cinema, performing an act of signification which qualifies this dialogue and its product – a truth of the text – as absolutely authentic, since they effectively pursue the ultimate realist goal – the narration of the real.

The combination of real and fictional interviews irremediably creates uncertainty around the exact ontological status of the film. Shu-chin Wu states that, “for the Chinese audience, the fictional characters are readily recognized as fictional [...] For audiences outside China, this distinction is uncertain”.⁹¹ To me, this interpretation looks far too strict for a film that generates its meaning through the instability of the audience's perception. Depending on the viewer's knowledge – its capacity to recognise the actors and their performances – the film swings between fiction and non-fiction, opening up to multiple interpretive possibilities that make *24 City* a rich and fluid text: for one person it will be pure documentary, for someone else pure fiction, and then there are all of the various hybrid stages in between. The tension between the two terms is thus one of the film's central elements and the resulting interpretive uneasiness clearly emerges from commentators' various attempts to find the most pertinent label for it. Among the most interesting proposals, Tou Jiangming defines it as a “fictive documentary” (*xuni jilupian*), Guan Yahuo suggests “plot documentary” (*juqing jilupian*) or “pseudo-documentary” (*wei jilupian*), while Lü Xinyu argues that this “documentary in disguise” (*weizhuang de jilupian*) or “fiction in disguise” (*weizhuang de gushipian*) finally constitutes an “anti-fiction fiction film” (*fan gushipian de gushipian*).⁹²

Convolved as it is, Lü's definition nonetheless emphasises the fictional component of the film. As argued previously, the construction of fictional characters serves the purpose of adding missing historical details. However, fiction in *24 City* is also a structural need, paradoxically required for the sake of documentary consistency: private memories – the main focus of Jia's attention – are fleeting objects referring to things past and unreferenced in

⁹¹ Wu, “Time, History, and Memory in Jia Zhangke's '24 City',” 8.

⁹² Tou, “Jia Zhangke de daotui yu weilai,” 112; Guan, “Shidai biange zhong de ji yi suipian,” 114; Lü in Dudley, Ouyang, Zhai, Lü, and Jia, “Chanshi Zhongguo de dianying shiren,” 258.

historiographical documents; the act of recollection is unstable and performative since past episodes are systematically altered or dismissed as they are narrated. Aware of this, Jia sees history as “a construct of real facts and imagination”; hence the blend of fiction and nonfiction appears as a stylistically coherent way of dealing with such matters.⁹³ From this perspective, the structural tension between fiction and non-fiction enables the film to fulfil other goals. First, it challenges official historical narratives to provide alternative versions. On this point, Shu-chin Wu aptly comments that this is not (only) intended to replace official historiography, but rather to supplement it by adding what it lacks, namely emotions.⁹⁴ This suggestion looks particularly relevant, as it shows how *24 City*, in line with the other films analysed in the dissertation, does not content itself with a superficial description of material reality, but rather goes beyond that to investigate its emotional substance. The second goal points to overcome the expressive limits of conventional documentary. As Paul Ward contends, with respect to hybrid documentary forms that he names either ‘docudrama’ or ‘dramadoc’, “they ‘document’ a real, social reality in an utterly compelling way, and reveal things about their [...] social contexts and characters that a ‘conventional’ documentary would arguably never be able to”.⁹⁵ This achievement proves feasible due to a wider aesthetic flexibility that exploits both the potential of documentary and the resources of fiction. Their interaction combines to define a value of ‘documentality’ (*wenxianxing*), which, by synthesising the meanings produced by the various fictional and non-fictional sources, finally expresses a truth of the text.⁹⁶

The documentality of *24 City* is not only defined by the alternation of real and fictional interviews, but is also enriched by a complex range of formal solutions. In the first place, it should be noted that the film self-consciously adopts different documentary modes, often pushing their representational standards to the limit. In his interactions with the interviewees, Jia adopts, to use Nichols’ terminology, a participatory-interactive mode that recalls the pattern of the *cinéma vérité* model. As already pointed out, its application becomes challenging when the director talks to his fictional characters and even more so when one of them – Song Weidong – addresses Jia with a question. On a few occasions, *24 City* also takes an observational stance reminiscent of classic Chinese independent documentaries. This happens when Jia observes the conversation between two characters out of the interview format. The first observational moment is the encounter between He Xikun and Master Wang, his former supervisor, at the factory. Master Wang has become old and almost deaf. Jia is not an interviewer here; he just observes the two people meeting up after many years and, in a *xianchang* manner, succeeds in

⁹³ Jia, “‘Ershisi cheng ji’ daoyan de hua,” 249.

⁹⁴ Wu, “Time, History, and Memory in Jia Zhangke’s ‘24 City’,” 9, 18.

⁹⁵ Ward, *Documentary*, 36-37.

⁹⁶ The term *wenxianxiang* is used by Jia Zhangke in Veg, “Building a Public Consciousness,” 63.

catching a moment of unexpected contingency: He Xikun is progressively touched by the encounter and his eyes become filled with tears. The second instance is a paradoxical one in which the observational stance is deployed to frame the fictional conversation between Hao Dali and a young employee. Jia reflects here on the viewer's expectations and the visual conventions of the observational *mise-en-scène*: as Hao is the first fictional character presented in the film, are viewers still persuaded that they are watching a 'pure' documentary? In addition to these, the director employs the poetic mode when, between interviews, he portrays the dismantlement of the factory. If, on the one hand, his aim is to capture the demolition as it happens, here and now, on the other hand, this *xianchang* attitude is supplemented by a lyrical and aestheticised spirit.⁹⁷ The accurate framing of and lighting on the people at work in the semi-deserted factory spaces, the combination of music and industrial sounds, the stylised portraits of silent workers standing still in front of the camera, and poetry lines appearing on screen; all of these features arguably fit in with the structural characteristics of the poetic documentary mode.

However, the documentary attitude that characterises *24 City* more distinctively is reflexivity. The reflexive mode, according to Nichols' definition, not only "[concerns] itself with talking about the historical world" but rather "addresses the question of *how* we talk about the historical world".⁹⁸ "Self-conscious not only about form and style", as with the poetic mode, but also about "strategy, structure, conventions, expectations, and effects", the reflexive mode focuses on the act of filmmaking and the problem of cinematic representation, challenging conventional viewing attitudes and orthodox realist practices.⁹⁹ Hence, as Paul Ward points out, "proper reflexivity involves an understanding of the social implications and consequences of revealing that something is a construction".¹⁰⁰ Jay Ruby understands this reflexive constructedness historically as the product of an era in which "we no longer trust the producers" and have discarded the idea that, "meaning resides in the world and human beings should strive to discover the inherent, objectively true reality of things".¹⁰¹ Therefore "to be reflexive is to reveal that films – all films, whether they are labelled fiction, documentary, or art – are created, structured articulations of the filmmakers and not authentic, objective records".¹⁰² Within the overarching framework of this discussion, we can thus understand this reflexive constructedness – expressed through the interaction of different documentary modes, stylised visual choices, fictional interviews, awareness of the real subjects to be filmed and their consequent reaction

⁹⁷ Nochimson, "Passion for Documentation," 413.

⁹⁸ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 56-57. Emphasis in the original.

⁹⁹ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 57

¹⁰⁰ Ward, *Documentary*, 19.

¹⁰¹ Ruby, "The Image Mirrored," 36.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 44.

in front of the camera – in performative terms, as an aesthetic construction that is consciously structured by the filmmaker to produce meaning.

Besides the narrative device enacted by the interviews, the stylistic composition of *24 City* is enhanced by a rich texture of aesthetic solutions. One of the most recurrent is the use of intermittent fades to black within a single interview. These break the virtual long takes and give rhythm to the text, literarily functioning as divisions between different poetic stanzas. Jia's portrayal of the locale is also significant for its aesthetic considerations as the factory under demolition is turned into an emptied, aestheticised non-place. The ruins of fallen walls and rusted machineries are investigated through carefully composed shots illuminated by soft greenish light, which attempts to rescue a residue of beauty and humanity. As an example of this, at some point the camera focuses on a colourful butterfly lying on a window among the dust and the industrial hammering noises: the epiphany of this discovery redeems the locale from its shabbiness and infuses it with unexpected beauty. With the exception of Hou Lijun who is interviewed on a bus (with the real Chengdu barely visible beyond its windows), the other conversations take place within the factory. The most evocative setting is that which hosts Guang Fengjiu. He is sitting in the orchestra of the factory's theatre and, while he is speaking, two men are playing badminton on the stage. In addition to the idea of theatricality offered by the spatial context, already in symbolic contrast with the 'true' status of Guan, the image of the two men represents a surreal visual commentary on the mutual verbal interaction between interviewer and interviewee. In this sense, borrowing the words of Kevin Lee, *24 City* can be seen as "an oral history project transformed into performance art", where 'performance' can be understood as the director's aesthetic performance in exploiting the expressive capacity of the cinematic medium.¹⁰³ It should be noted, however, that this aesthetic show-off does not amount negatively to mannerist excess, but is rather functional to the film's objectives. As Stella Bruzzi comments with reference to Errol Morris' documentaries, in this case as well, "the slipperiness and indeterminacy of truth is principally signalled by how this overwrought visual style becomes linked to a scepticism concerning the capability or not of documentary to present such a truth".¹⁰⁴

The most striking aesthetic element is possibly represented by a number of photograph-like portrayals disseminated throughout the film. These *tableaux vivants* frame factory workers standing still in front of the camera and gazing at it while the director (and the viewer too) looks back at them for the duration of a long take. The implications of these portraits are several. The act of looking into the camera recalls the unexpected occurrence of people peeping into it in the

¹⁰³ Lee, "'24 City'," 44.

¹⁰⁴ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 195.

jishizhuyi works discussed in chapter 3. Whilst in those instances the fact was contingent and disruptive of the cinematic mechanism, here it becomes aesthetically and self-reflexively conscious. More specifically, the act of staring at the camera and remaining almost still in front of it proves cinematically subversive with regard to *xianchang* spatio-temporal connotations. In the *xianchang* logic, as enunciated by Wu Wenguang, “‘time’ as it is embodied in the documentary is time manifested as an integrated temporal unity. Time manifests itself in process [...] I understand process to be the movement of something between point A and point B, or the completion of a course of action by the film subject”.¹⁰⁵ The sense of real time on screen and movement throughout the space are thus tightly interconnected in Wu’s conception, while Jia’s *tableaux* breaks with this formulation altogether. Recalling Deleuze’s Proust-derived idea of ‘a little time in its pure state’, these portraits nullify both time and space, and alienate the subjects from their contingent determination. However, Jia’s aesthetic scheme does not abstract these subjects completely. On the contrary, the obliteration of time and space is deployed to erase any external distraction and allow the director and the viewer to better focus on the objective: the inner life of people. In the words of Jia Zhangke:

For the most important thing is that, in that silence and through the camera, we are trying to capture the subtle changes of expression, to display the intense activities of the inner world [...] to look for certain kinds of traces and vestiges [...] I felt as if we were mourning silently for the lives and the stories of the past [...] For me these portraits are not just people’s faces nor some form complementary to their narration, nor even a mere ritual. For through that ritual we sense the many lives that have been ignored, ordinary people’s lives ignored. We hope that through time, through silence, and through this ritual, the film can help these people achieve some recognition.¹⁰⁶

For all its stylistic composition, *24 City* represents an unusual object within the history of Chinese film (Chu Yingchi notices, for instance, that reflexive documentaries are rare in China).¹⁰⁷ Commenting on Joan Chen’s performance, Luke Robinson contends that the film embodies “a counter- or alternative narrative” with respect to the recent trend of independent documentaries, both in the public and private form.¹⁰⁸ However, whilst this might suggest the idea of a clear-cut rupture, I would rather interpret the stylistic configuration of *24 City* transvergently, namely as the allogenetic evolution of elements that can be traced back to

¹⁰⁵ Wu, *Jingtou xiang ziji de yanjing yiyang*, 217.

¹⁰⁶ Cited in Dudley, “Interview with Jia Zhang-ke,” 82.

¹⁰⁷ Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 25. As an example of the few reflexive documentaries produced in China, Chu mentions Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *Tea-Horse Road Series: Delamu (Chama gudao xilie, 2004)*.

¹⁰⁸ Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary*, 156.

previous traditions. This connection to and progression from preceding forms is most notably detectable in the use of talking heads. This technique was widely employed in the inaugural works of the independent wave (*Bumming in Beijing* and *I Graduated!*, for instance) and “served to embody a form of liveness that was both immediate and contingent, with the voice of the film’s subjects as the site where this quality appeared to be located”.¹⁰⁹ Similarly to what has already been argued with regard to *Disorder*, on the stylistic level, *24 City* more pertinently links with public documentaries, whereas private ones tend to avoid any staged element, including interviews. The relevance of this device, however, proves wider and extends the film’s transvergent sphere beyond the *jishizhuyi* practice to connect with, perhaps surprisingly, the harshly-rejected tradition of *zhuantipian* and its location-based interviews. Although Duan Jinchuan acknowledges its lingering influence on the first works of the independent wave, most directors have opposed the *zhuantipian* as a scripted non-fiction form unable of providing an authentic description of reality.¹¹⁰ Conservative as it might appear, *24 City*’s connection with the *zhuantipian* should be seen instead as the recovery and reinvention of a tradition that proved ground-breaking on its appearance and whose stylistic and ideological innovations have been crucial to moving away from the dogmatic imperative. Whereas the talking head is often negatively associated with institutional powers “announcing official policy, imparting official information, or expressing an official attitude,”¹¹¹ *24 City* overcomes this bias and succeeds in reinventing the genre by filtering the *zhuantipian* through the conventions of the independent documentary and its penchant towards the expression of individual and alternative viewpoints. Hence, to add yet another layer of transvergent connectivity, it proves interesting to follow Li Jie’s remark, in which he states that the act of addressing the camera in independent documentaries recalls the Maoist tradition of ‘speaking bitterness’ (*su ku*).¹¹² Again, this should not be seen as a literal transposition of a past tradition, but rather its creative reinvention within a new cultural and ideological environment.

The extensive use of talking heads in *24 City* is relevant for our discussion of documentary performativity as well. Although, in general terms, the verbal expression of private memories and repressed emotions might appear as a contingent and unmediated act, the talking head instead embodies the means of a mediated cinematic experience. This mediation is enacted by a double agency. On the one hand, there is the self-narrativisation of the talking subject, who is “performative with regard to the truths and memories of testifying and witnessing”.¹¹³ In other words, the testimony is not necessarily spontaneous as the subject has

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 133.

¹¹⁰ Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*, 88.

¹¹¹ Halpern Martineau, “Talking About Our Lives and Experiences,” 256.

¹¹² Li, “Filming Power and the Powerless,” 39.

¹¹³ Sarkar and Walker, “Introduction,” 10.

to make sense of it before addressing the camera and accordingly decides what and how to narrate. On the other hand, the director, by asking questions, shapes the subject's narrative and, later in the post-production process, might further model it according to his directorial sensitivity (through editing, for instance).¹¹⁴ These occurrences can be clearly detected in *24 City* as well, in particular when Jia Zhangke engages directly with the interviewees (a matter further complicated when this interaction is with the fictional characters). However, the acknowledgment of the talking head as a means of mediation does not invalidate the importance of the testimony produced: it does not provide an objective description of an (unattainable) unvarnished reality, but rather portrays an authentically and performatively subjective reality shaped through the cinematic medium as a truth of the text.

24 City is particularly open to transvergent analysis – in its interdisciplinary and multimedia meaning – as it draws inspiration from and actually combines different arts: film, photography, poetry, and music. In the words of Jia Zhangke:

I like a strong mix of different media in my films, because it brings out the complexity of life [...] These elements complement each other. Language has certain limitations, but it acts as a complement to silence and allows us to use our imagination. To tackle the challenge of giving viewers a clear sense of China's complicated realities, you need to use a variety of methods.¹¹⁵

The combination of different artistic forms is thus an attempt to express the complexity of China's postsocialist reality and its overlapping temporalities. The agency of memory and its narrative ambiguities further complicate the matter and thus require different expressive modes to appreciate the text at multiple levels. The use of various art forms, expressing the director's aesthetic performance, aims to give account of historical truths in a sensorial way, arousing emotional reactions in the viewer by submitting him/her to the agency of a variety of aesthetic stimuli.

Songs and music play an important role in the film. The original soundtrack is realised by Jia's regular collaborators Lim Giong and Yoshihiro Hanno. Their heterogeneous compositions range from orchestral string music to electronic sounds, which are mainly employed as aural counterparts to images of workers, labour and the progressive demolition of the factory. Blended with the industrial noises of machinery still at work, their effect on the viewer acts at an emotional level, resonating with the melodramatic nuances (strings) or substantiating the

¹¹⁴ For a thorough analysis of the talking head in Chinese independent documentary see Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary*, 130-52.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Chan, "Jia Zhangke Interview."

idea of modern day changes (electronic music). However, the most effective musical commentary is offered by the songs played and performed throughout the film. These range from patriotic songs (*Zai chuang huihuang / Bring About Brilliance Again* and *Ge chang zuguo / Singing for the Motherland*) to traditional opera pieces (*Zang hua / The Burial of Flowers* from *Honglou meng / Dream of the Red Chamber*) and from vintage recordings (the Japanese TV series score *Arigato Anata / Red Suspicion*) to recent hits (Chyi Chin's *Waimian de shijie / The World Outside*). As is typical in the *oeuvre* of Jia Zhangke, pop culture (and popular music in particular) works as a Proustian device that triggers memories and feelings, and is able to shape a dense sense of history.

An unusual aesthetic choice is the insertion of poems, which occasionally appear on screen in the form of inter-titles, as a counterpoint to the images and music. Chosen by the director and his co-scriptwriter, the poetess Zhai Yongming, the poetic texts belong to a heterogenous body of works, including both Chinese and European poems: traditional Chinese verses from *Dream of the Red Chamber* are followed by the modernist lines of Ouyang Jianghe's *Glass Factory (Boli Gongchang)* and Wang Xia's *Innate Character (Benzhi)*, and enriched by two references to Irish poet William Butler Yeats (*The Coming of Wisdom with Time* and *Split Milk*). In Jia's words:

We also wanted to use poetry to evoke certain feelings, the kind of poetry that can resonate with ordinary speech. I have this strong feeling that contemporary mainstream films depend increasingly on action, which gets faster and faster all the time. But people have complex feelings that can often be more accurately and clearly expressed through language. So why not make a movie that returns to words? Why don't we let words bring their lives back to those people?¹¹⁶

Used to create a poetic contrast with the material concreteness of the factory's locale, the written word is thus intended as an element to transcend contingent reality and evoke deeper feelings. Moreover, visually, Jia employs poems and other inter-titles as graphic tools to revive the vitality and literary quality of silent cinema.¹¹⁷ The director in fact makes explicit reference to the seminal *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory (La Sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon, Louis Lumière, 1895)* by showing the factory gate and the passage of the workers through it. Jia comments on this as follows:

¹¹⁶ Cited in Dudley, "Interview with Jia Zhang-ke," 80.

¹¹⁷ Jia in Dudley, Ouyang, Zhai, Lü, and Jia, "Chanshi Zhongguo de dianying shiren," 258-59.

When the Lumière brothers invented film [...] they set up their camera in front of the gates of the Renault car factory and filmed the workers going to and coming from work [...] This is a great tradition on two levels: firstly, the beginnings of film are rooted in a documentary aesthetics; secondly, the first time mankind used a camera to confront the world we live in, it focused on ordinary labourers.¹¹⁸

By making reference to the documentary origins of the cinematic art, Jia symbolically marks a new beginning by virtue of a distinctive understanding of the interaction between fiction and non-fiction. Although not totally original if seen within a broader international context, this formula appears to be strikingly innovative in the Chinese context: updating *jishizhuyi* concerns of documentary authenticity, *24 City* shapes a meaningful document that powerfully reflects on national history, private memories, reality and – especially – its representation, by effectively exploiting the resources of film style and aesthetics. To conclude, *24 City* is not a declaration of mistrust in the possibilities of realist and documentary representation. Contrarily, Jia Zhangke reasserts his trust in their expressive and creative capacities and demonstrates how, by combining fiction and non-fiction and submitting the viewer to a rich aesthetic experience, realism as a stylistic category is still effective and is also productively evolving. In this sense, the factory under demolition symbolically parallels the progressive cracking of an old vision of what realism (and documentary) is expected to be.

2.3 OXHIDE AND OXHIDE II

Female director Liu Jiayin – currently a professor of screenwriting at the Beijing Film Academy – realised her debut feature *Oxhide* at the age 23, and immediately drew the attention of the international film festival circuit.¹¹⁹ Running for 110 minutes with a total of twenty-three fixed and uninterrupted shots (the shortest lasting approximately two minutes and the longest around twenty minutes), the film chronicles the minutiae of Liu's family life: within the limited space of their cramped Beijing apartment, Liu herself, her mother and her father engage in menial conversations (mainly about the man's unsuccessful handbag-making business), small fights and household chores. In a distinctive anti-narrative and anti-climatic fashion, the film accumulates minor details of the family's everyday life, shifting the viewer's attention towards its formal structure rather than its contents.¹²⁰ Premiering in the Directors' Fortnight section of

¹¹⁸ Cited in Veg, "Building a Public Consciousness," 2-3.

¹¹⁹ Just to mention its major recognitions, the film was awarded the FIPRESCI prize at the Berlin Film Festival, the Tigers Award in Vancouver, and the Golden DV Award in Hong Kong.

¹²⁰ Liu makes this point in several interviews, highlighting her interest in developing an original aesthetic approach rather than commenting on contemporary Chinese reality and the relationship of her family

the Cannes Film Festival, *Oxhide II* is an even more radical follow-up to the first instalment. Squeezed into a single room of their house, sat around a table, the same three characters are portrayed, in real time, preparing *jiaozi*, Chinese dumplings: we see them chopping chives and meat, kneading and filling the dough, and finally eating their food. Running for 132 minutes, the film is composed of only nine shots (again fixed and uninterrupted), with the camera moving clockwise around the table, and shifting by a 45-degree angle for each consecutive shot.

The *Oxhide* series is an interesting object for my discussion for two main reasons: the priority of form over content as a space for the production of meaning, and the ambiguity of the documentary response activated by the film. However, compared to *24 City*, this perceptive uncertainty is of a different kind: whilst Jia Zhangke places it as the central element of his work and asks the viewer to critically engage with it, Liu Jiayin overcomes this dichotomy altogether. Both films are completely staged: both scripts were written in advance and the three protagonists rehearsed them before playing them out in front of the camera. Still, the family members play lightly-fictionalised versions of themselves, enacting details of their personal lives within the actual space of their house. More significantly, as Liu deliberately eschews any attempt at narration and keeps the level of conversation intentionally dull, the standard objectives of a 'fiction film' remain largely unfulfilled. On this point Liu comments:

many documentary-like films are made using fiction film techniques [...] I think ultimately it depends on what your point is. If your goal is to document family life, you can simply do so. You can leave your camera on while something is taking place. But you can also choose to express something more specific by exercising more control over the whole process. Maybe because I wanted to try something different, I preferred the second approach.¹²¹

What Liu expresses is an expanded documentary view, ideally in line with Michael Chanan's suggestion that "perhaps we must start to think of a new and paradoxical kind of representational space which incorporates various elements of both fiction and documentary without falling back into either".¹²² With regard to her project, Liu more specifically points out: "My idea is to go back to 'life' itself [...] We had many, many rehearsals, however mostly about positions, because of the set-up of the camera and less about dialogue".¹²³ The idea of getting closer to life through staging looks paradoxical yet perfectly consistent with Liu's cinematic

with the outside society. However, it does not mean that the viewer is totally prevented from glimpsing some of the family's contingent social concerns, especially regarding their uncertain economic condition.

¹²¹ Cited in Yan, "CinemaTalk."

¹²² Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary*, 249.

¹²³ Rist, "Interview with Liu Jiayin."

intentions. Although considered unethical and deceptive, and largely associated with the 'dogmatic' tradition of Chinese documentary cinema, Liu takes fictionalising devices such as staging and re-enactment, and creatively re-interprets them to meet her formal (rather than narrative) expectations. In other words, unlike the dogmatic film culture, these techniques are not employed to manipulate the contents as these clearly occupy only a secondary level of interest in the projects; rather, they are consciously deployed to support Liu's stylistic conception of cinema. In this sense, given her professed disinterest in developing a content-based narrative, Liu conflates fiction and non-fiction by exposing the fundamental speciousness of such a debate and rather directs our attention to the film's stylistic structure. At the same time, from an analytical perspective, I suggest that a flexible recourse to the tools of documentary analysis still proves a useful reading strategy to penetrate Liu's deceptively simple yet densely meaningful formal apparatus.

The subjects' performance constitutes a crucial element in the film. As already mentioned, the characters play out scripted roles, yet these never amount to a narrative development. In a way, we can argue that they perform just to hide another kind of performance, i.e. the spontaneous acting of the subjects in front of the camera. Chanan argues that "being filmed is to give up your own authorship of yourself," and this is what actually happens to Liu's parents under Liu's cinematic control.¹²⁴ However, more pertinently, I understand their roles in light of Vinicius Navarro's definition of non-fictional performance as "a kind of performance that resists narrative finality and rhetorical argumentation, and that is best described not as acting but as presentation or display".¹²⁵ Similarly, in the *Oxhide* series, *de facto* fictional performances are turned into non-fictional ones, in the sense that they constitute a mere "presentation or display". This interpretation is strengthened by the positions assigned to the characters within the frame and their resulting aesthetic value. Within an overall aesthetic configuration reminiscent of *arte povera*, as Andrea Picard suggests,¹²⁶ Liu composes a series of still lives in which human bodies and inanimate objects perform the same aesthetic function. The table, the lamp, the sewing machine, the jar of vinegar, and similar domestic objects occupy the camera frame in equal proportion to the living characters, and sometimes even more, as in some instances these objects impede our view of the main action. As suggested by Liu's abovementioned statement, her main preoccupation was not with dialogues but with spatial positions, as bodies and objects became aesthetic tools that the director displayed on the scene for the sake of her own desired visual effect.

¹²⁴ Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary*, 215.

¹²⁵ Navarro, "Nonfictional Performance from Portrait Films to the Internet,"

¹²⁶ Picard, "Liu Jiayin."

This configuration is complicated by the presence in the film of Liu Jiayin herself, as someone who is called upon to constantly negotiate between two kinds of performances: her on-screen performance as an actor (playing herself) and her off-screen performance as a filmmaker (and one particularly concerned with the film's formal outcome). Using Yiman Wang's terminology, the *Oxhide* films are shaped around the interactive ambiguities of the two documentary attitudes expressed by Liu's double position: on the one hand, the "I am one of them" stance, expressing the filmmaker's "schizophrenic sense of simultaneous intimacy with and alienation from [...] her subjects" (even more so here, as the director is dealing with her family); and, on the other hand, the "they are my actors" stance, leading to "a creative and reconstructive understanding of reality [...] seen as malleable and susceptible to the interventions of the 'actors'," where the term "actor" also refers to the filmmaker's agency.¹²⁷ Hence, an exclusive dichotomisation clearly separating the 'inside' from the 'outside', the 'subjects' from the 'objects' of cinematic representation is hardly tenable in this case. Conversely, I find Michael Renov's discussion of domestic ethnography an interesting framework in which to interpret the dynamics at work in this instance. Playing at the boundaries between the inside and the outside, domestic ethnography:

engages in the documentation of family members or, less literally, of people with whom the maker has maintained long-standing everyday relations and has thus achieved a level of casual intimacy. Because the lives of artist and subject are interlaced through communal or blood ties, the documentation of the one tends to implicate the other in complicated ways; indeed consanguinity and co(i)mplication are domestic ethnography's defining features. By *co(i)mplication* I mean both complexity and the interpenetration of subject/object identities. To pursue the point yet further, one could say that domestic ethnography is a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice; it functions as a vehicle of self-examination, a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other.¹²⁸

In foregrounding issues of self-knowledge as the product of the constitutive relations between the subjects and the maker, Renov understands domestic ethnography mainly as a practice through which to unveil the dynamics of psycho-sexual identity. However, this is not quite the case with *Oxhide* as the identity co(i)mplicated by the representational process is one of a different kind – but which one exactly? Renov argues that "for the domestic ethnographer, there is no fully outside position available" so "there can be no pretense of objectivity for an

¹²⁷ Wang, "'I Am One of Them' and 'They Are My Actors'," 235.

¹²⁸ Renov, "Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the 'Other' Self," 141. Original emphasis.

investigation,”¹²⁹ hence subjectivity is what is at stake here. Elaborating on Michel Foucault’s argument that the most pressing concern of our present time is the fight against subjection, that is, the submission of subjectivity, Renov contends that “this circumstance call[s] for a rigorous and historicizing interrogation of power as exerted and experienced”, and subjectivity – “that multilayered construction of selfhood imagined, performed, and assigned” – represents the crucial site of this struggle.¹³⁰ However, as the power mobilised within the cinematic creation here is the power of the director “exerted [on] and experienced [by]” her actors (including herself), the subjectivity that constitutes the filmmaker-ethnographer’s identity is not a psycho-sexual-social one, but rather a cinematic one: the cinematic self of Liu Jiayin shaping the aesthetic autobiography of her stylistic consciousness into images.

Liu’s plan for an uncompromising aesthetic autobiography is accomplished through a rigorous mise-en-scene. The *Oxhide* series adopts a distinctive observational stance which is, at the same time, stylistically self-referential – in that it forces the viewer’s attention towards the film’s formal structure – and narratively subversive – in that it carefully avoids any climax to defuse the emotional potential entailed in the ethnographic (self-)narration. To understand how these two aspects are combined in the film’s observational mode, it proves useful to consider to what effect the camera turns a private space (the family’s real-life Beijing apartment) into a public one (i.e. open to the audience’s view). Taking a camera into the inside sphere of a family space is usually understood as an act that, by crossing the boundaries of privacy, aims to witness the intimate. Therefore, according to Paula Rabinowitz, documentaries focusing on family life re-enact what Roland Barthes, originally referring to photography, defined as ‘the publicity of the private,’ that is, the eruption of the private into the public: the “decision to move into the home, positioning living cinema in the living room of middle-class suburbia, suggest[s] that the erasure of the divide between public and private, a dream of cinéma vérité, had been achieved”.¹³¹ However, this kind of approach – penetrating the private and peeping into the intimate – necessarily involves a more or less pronounced voyeuristic element, which accordingly channels some sort of emotional attachment on the viewer’s part towards the vicissitudes of the subjects. Liu Jiayin instead works to eschew any voyeuristic temptation and, for all the emotional and narrative dryness of the film, the camera does not seem to peep furtively into the private lives of the characters but rather, as Christen Cornell puts it, makes us “wonder if someone has forgotten their camera and left the room”.¹³²

¹²⁹ Ibid., 142.

¹³⁰ Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, xvi.

¹³¹ Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 134.

¹³² Cornell, “Fly on the Wall.”

In the first instance, this feeling is produced by the unconventional framing that systematically chops off the characters' bodies, cuts the off-screen action, gives visual priority to objects rather than humans, or simply leaves us staring at an unadorned wall or table. To obtain this effect, Liu surprisingly adopts a 2.35:1 aspect ratio that creates a CinemaScope format within the HD video.¹³³ Possibly a unique case in digital Chinese independent film, this particular ratio is commonly used by filmmakers whose aim is to expand the viewing spectacle to achieve an epic effect. However, Liu makes a subversive use of the wide frame as her purpose admittedly was "to see less."¹³⁴ Hence, as just mentioned, the viewer rarely has the chance to see complete figures and actions on screen, while inanimate objects – in particular the table in *Oxhide II* – unconventionally acquire an epic stance, horizontally stretching to occupy the entire frame.

The 45-degree movement of the camera around the table in *Oxhide II* further emphasises this aesthetic choice. David Bordwell states that, "what could seem an arbitrary structural gimmick is justified by the fact that each setup proves ideally suited to each stage of the [dumpling-making] process".¹³⁵ Contrarily, I tend to disagree with this understanding because, although the visual angle changes in each consecutive shot, the viewer hardly achieves a more comprehensive view of the scene. Therefore I contend that this mechanism aims to strengthen a feeling of visual uneasiness matching a conception of reality that remains elusive even within the severely limited space of the apartment.

The mathematical shifts of the camera in *Oxhide II* strongly denote the filmic medium as a scientific instrument – an inscription device seemingly uninterested in the human activities captured through its lens. This idea is also conveyed by Liu's strict fixed camera, long take approach. This stylistic pattern has been recurrent in so-called 'art cinema', especially in the Asian context (starting with the early works of Taiwanese masters Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang). However, once again Liu reinvents this technique giving it a distinctive aesthetic twist. Filmmakers privileging such an approach have most often favoured long shots with the camera placed at some distance from the subjects (in mainland Chinese cinema, one instance is Jia Zhangke's *Platform*). In contrast, in Liu's work the subjects/objects are framed in close and extreme close shots, therefore further preventing the viewer from acquiring a wider visual knowledge of the locale. Accordingly, Liu also gives up depth of field, which is one of the most paradigmatic techniques of realism.

¹³³ To achieve such an unusual format for digital filmmaking, Liu hand-manufactured a paper mask that she applied directly to the lens of the camera.

¹³⁴ Cited in Bordwell, "Wantons and wontons."

¹³⁵ Ibid.

The fixity of the camera – associated with the restricted visual field and the various aesthetic reinterpretations (fictional/non-fictional performances, framing, aspect ratio, close-ups) – triggers a reflection on the limitation of the realist gaze and, more generally, on the impossibility of the film medium to capture the real as a totality. However, such recurrent preoccupation with formal matters does not aim to produce a negative statement about the expressive possibilities of film. On the contrary, Liu experiments with a variety of aesthetic solutions in order to find alternative expressive spaces. In this respect, Liu possibly finds the most effective solution in her use of the off-screen space where, in many instances, and especially in the first *Oxhide* instalment, the main action takes place. Borrowing André Bazin's words:

The screen is not a frame like that of a picture, but a mask (*cache*) which allows only a part of the action to be seen. When a character moves off screen, we accept the fact that he is out of sight, but he continues to exist in his own capacity at some other place.¹³⁶

Similarly, Liu Jiayin conceives the off-screen space as an added dimension of depth that exists beyond the fixity of the frame. The contrast between the camera's stillness and the knowledge of life happening outside of the frame enunciates the goal of Liu's cinematic essay: showing at once the limits and the possibilities of the camera.

The cinematic treatment of space in the *Oxhide* series is also tightly connected to the question of time. This issue becomes a central one especially in the second instalment, where all of the action – the preparation of *jiaozi* – is followed from the beginning to the end in (seeming) real time. Once again, Wu Wenguang's aforementioned conception of real time as generated by movements through space is not applicable to the present case. Whilst Wu understands time in terms of dynamic development, Liu's fixed camera crystallises it, yet without pointing to its erasure (as was the case with *24 City's* tableaux). Her formal plan is structured around an Aristotelian idea of unity of time and space in order to make the time of cinema coincide with the time of life. However, Liu once more strives to offer an unconventional cinematic effect. Unlike the long-take real-time practice of art cinema auteurs (again the Taiwanese Hou, Yang, and Tsai Ming-liang appear to be the most pertinent examples) who bind the temporal flow to an existential condition of their characters, Liu simply aspires to film time as time. As there are no major references to time past or time future in the film, time here is just real time present, contingent on the 'here and now' of clearing the table, preparing the *jiaozi* and eating them, without the pretension of saying anything beyond this. In other words,

¹³⁶ Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 105.

Liu Jiayin's work is still concerned with *xianchang*, but its practice is freed from any socially contingent understanding and is rather transfigured in its purest form as the simple recording of a presence, of something existing at a certain time within a certain place.

What is then the transvergent relationship connecting the *Oxhide* series with the preceding *jishizhuyi* practice? The *Oxhide* series significantly differs from *jishizhuyi* realism on two main levels: in terms of visual style, the unscripted spontaneity of the handheld camera witnessing uncontrolled situations is replaced by a scripted and tightly-controlled formal apparatus; in terms of content, the social commentary on ordinary people caught in the turmoil of epochal transformations is discarded in favour of an aesthetic commentary on film itself. In truth, Liu does not venture into totally alien cinematic territory, but rather takes many elements of the *jishizhuyi* tradition and reinvents them allogenetically to generate new aesthetic solutions: non-professional actors and their (non)fictional performances, the long take and the management of real time, the balance between the observational and the voyeuristic, a reconceptualisation of *xianchang* and other typical on-the-spot features such as real locations, the representation of mundane occurrences, and the use of natural lights and sounds. Liu Jiayin rethinks these aesthetics patterns into a new stylistic framework that, although strikingly different from the other examples analysed in this dissertation at the visual level, consistently partakes in the allogenetic assumptions of a renewed realist consciousness.

I have focused so far on filmmakers who have experimented with magic(al) elements and (non)fictional aestheticisation to express the complexity of the real and, simultaneously, its fundamental elusiveness. Liu's research is grounded in this same realist appraisal – that reality is provisional and not containable within the borders of the frame – but she adopts a different aesthetic strategy to express her concerns. By staring at still lives almost devoid of any socio-political dimension, the *Oxhide* films reject both grand narratives and the idea that the camera can effectively give a full account of the real. At the same time, the filmmaker does not resign herself to pessimistic considerations of postmodern flatness and meaninglessness, but rather ingeniously experiments with original formal structures to overcome the limitations of the realist gaze. In the *Oxhide* series, film aesthetics stand as a truth of text.

2.4 THE DITCH

Wang Bing, one of the most acclaimed documentary filmmakers in the contemporary scene, made his greatly-anticipated debut in fiction filmmaking in 2009 with *The Ditch*.¹³⁷ The film is an

¹³⁷ Wang Bing first made his name in the international film circuit with his documentaries *Tiexi Qu: West of the Tracks* and *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* (*He Fengming*, 2007). In fact, Wang's first fiction work is

adaptation of Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (*Jiabiangou jishi*, 2002), a collection of short stories based on interviews with survivors of Jiabiangou, a labour camp (*laogai*) in the Gansu desert, where 'rightists' (*youpai fenzi*) were deported to complete their 're-education through labour' (*laodong jiaoyang*) during the Anti-Rightist Movement (*fan youpai yundong*, 1957-60).¹³⁸ Wang Bing selects some of the episodes chronicled in the book and re-enacts them within a unified temporal frame, namely the last dramatic months of the campaign from October 1960 onwards, as they occurred in the Jiabiangou's satellite camp of Mingshui.

The film's narrative is purportedly minimal and fragmentary. The first part almost exclusively (re)presents scenes of excruciating physical exhaustion. Upon their arrival at the camp, swept by the cold wind, a group of prisoners is forced to carry out pointless manual labour. In the darkness of the underground dugout that serves as their dormitory, men die from starvation and their corpses are buried in the desert. The prisoners' struggle against the famine is depicted in shockingly graphic detail: one man catches a rat and makes soup with it, and another eats some grain that he finds in the vomit of a fellow detainee. Someone else is even accused of cannibalism as corpses are found with missing body parts. In the second part, a woman arrives from Shanghai to bring food to her imprisoned husband, only to discover that he died just a few days earlier. The other prisoners are reluctant to show her his burial site since they suspect his body might have been cannibalised. She nevertheless starts searching in the open desert, checks many rough burials and finally succeeds in her mission. It is an agonising hunt that the camera stubbornly follows in a long and devastating sequence. The film ends with prisoners being notified that they can leave Jiabiangou. However, the camp's cadre asks one of them to remain in order to help him with the arrival of new prisoners. In this way, the victim becomes a potential torturer within a circle of historical violence in which morality is suspended for the sake of mere survival.

The Ditch is a fictional re-enactment of real historical events. As such, the following analysis by no means questions the film's status as fiction. However, I wish to suggest a reading that does not take the film's fictional narrative as the core point of the discussion, but instead highlights the work's stylistic configuration and its paradoxical documentary potential. As I shall explain below, this specific reading is made possible by the substantial employment of documentary-derived techniques that make *The Ditch* "at one and the same time a historical

the 16-minute short film *Brutality Factory* (*Baoli gongchang*). Part of the omnibus, *State of the World* (*O estado du mundo*, 2007), *Brutality Factory* re-enacts a struggle session during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, *The Ditch* – that premiered in competition at the 2009 Venice Film Festival – is more precisely Wang Bing's first full-length feature film.

¹³⁸ The Anti-Rightist Movement was a repressive campaign ordered by Mao Zedong in reaction to the responses that emerged during the Hundred Flowers Movement (*baihua yundong*, 1956-57) in which intellectuals were encouraged to voice their critical views on the Chinese Communist Party.

film, a contemporary documentary and a hybrid narrative film”.¹³⁹ However, I will attempt to overcome the limitations of a simple aesthetic description by proposing an interpretive strategy that helps to fully appreciate the multiple implications of Wang’s aesthetic enterprise, namely, to detail the ways in which his aesthetic choices – more than the film’s basic narrative or the mere re-enactment of historical events – effectively contribute to shaping a historical understanding of the represented events. In other words, this analysis reads *The Ditch* as a paradoxical trans-historical documentary that pushes documentary practice to its extreme representational limit – that is, filming the past.

This stylistic configuration should first of all be understood in transvergent connection with Wang Bing’s previous documentaries, of which *The Ditch* represents an allogetic development that is consistent with the more general evolution of the realist style in the context of Chinese cinema. In preparation for the film, Wang Bing conducted a series of interviews with survivors of the Anti-Rightist Movement. One of these testimonies stood out due to its clarity and intensity to the extent that Wang decided to make it into a documentary of its own: *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir*. Sitting in He Fengming’s living room, the director uses a single frontal camera set-up to record the woman’s three-hour-long account on her life’s hardship: her initial enthusiasm for the revolution, her deportation to a labour camp as a suspected rightist element, her suffering during the Cultural Revolution, and her final rehabilitation. While He delivers her intense monologue, the camera remains still and distant, almost detached. With a narrative flow punctuated only by minimal editing, the camera’s non-involvement serves two main purposes. On the one hand, in line with the social and expressive concerns of Chinese independent documentary, Wang pays respect to He’s account by providing a faithful record of her words and emotions.¹⁴⁰ Exclusively relying on the oral testimony of her terrifying past, framed within the banal present of a poorly illuminated living room, Wang sets up an aesthetic construction based on a distinctive spatial connotation in which past and present reverberate with one another through the agency of memory. Likewise, the dismantled factory in *Tiexi Qu* constitutes a meaningful spatial location, which allows China’s socialist past and capitalist present to critically engage in a mutual reflection. On the other hand, as Sebastian Veg suggests, “the camera’s refusal to become ‘implicated’ in her story” is “a strategy to frame or resist this emotion” with the purpose of creating a critical distance, hence turning her narration “into an object for reflection”.¹⁴¹ Similarly, despite a narrative rich in highly emotional moments, *The Ditch* never surrenders to melodramatic temptations and, by opting for specific stylistic choices

¹³⁹ Pollacchi, “Wang Bing’s ‘The Ditch’,” 190.

¹⁴⁰ In Wang’s own words: “It was not up to me to tell her story, my role was to give her the chance to do so. This is *her film*, I wanted to offer her a space for expression, for freedom, and allow her to address the audience directly.” Cited in “Entretien Wang Bing.” Original emphasis.

¹⁴¹ Veg, “The Limits of Representation,” 177, 175.

(the absence of music and archival footage, for instance), it keeps emotions under control to produce a cinematic distance that is open to critical consideration. Like in Wang's previous works and as I will discuss later, this approach is mainly activated through the specific use of the space, which becomes the physical and symbolic locus for the articulation of historical reflections.

There is one moment in He Fengming's narration in which we can ideally interpret as Wang Bing's trespassing from documentary to fiction. The woman remembers her visit to Jiabangou where her husband was detained. Upon her arrival, she discovers that he is already dead – an episode that reminds us the one later portrayed in *The Ditch*. At this point, the camera subtly narrows to a closer focus on the subject's face, as if to better penetrate her unspeakable grief. Here, Wang Bing embarks on his fictional project, namely, the utopian enterprise of capturing the past in vivid documentary images. In this process, the filmmaker is aware of the representational limits of such a venture, yet remains determined to test the flexibility of the realist practice in critical and aesthetic terms. Fiction – here implying mainly reconstruction and re-enactment – is necessary for historical narration. In this sense, echoing Jean-Louis Comolli's interactive understanding of the relationship between fiction and history, *The Ditch* articulates the uneasy balance in which "the cinematic representation of History defies Fiction although it holds only through it".¹⁴² Wang Bing's distinctive interpretation of this relation can be appreciated as an evolution of what Linda Williams defines as the postmodern documentary desire to access "traumatic historical truths inaccessible to representation by any simple or single 'mirror with a memory' [...] in the *vérité* sense of capturing the events as they happen".¹⁴³ If, as in Williams's analysis, the unrepresentability of the past urges filmmakers to devise strategies of indirect evocation, in *The Ditch*, fiction is used to face this past directly, and to capture its image as if it is unravelling in front of the camera here and now. This can be seen as an extreme allogenic form of *jishizhuyi's xianchang* that challenges Comolli's classic argument that the past cannot be filmed. Hence, given his understanding of history as an entity in a constant dialogic relationship with the present, Wang Bing cannot content himself with secluding the past to a far safety zone. Instead, he aims to develop a visual approach that can show past history as immediate, present, and still dangerous. *The Ditch* does not achieve this goal simply by means of documentary-like techniques, but rather by adopting a more pervasive documentary frame of mind through which the director approaches his subject matter as living history.

Whereas Philip Rosen sees historical films as the "construction of film spectatorship as a trans-historical viewpoint on a historical past", Wang Bing attempts to reduce the gap entailed

¹⁴² Comolli, "Historical Fiction," 42.

¹⁴³ Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories," 62.

in the prefix “trans-” and to virtually achieve a visual conflation of past and present.¹⁴⁴ In other words, the filmmaker seeks to stimulate a documentary response in his audience, and more specifically one reminiscent of the vitality of live recording. His aesthetic strategy can thus be analysed via three main aspects: the use of a high-definition (HD) digital camera and the cinematic techniques associated with it; the management of natural space; and, the self-reflexivity of the *mise-en-scène*.

Exploiting the technological capabilities of the HD digital camera, Wang Bing aims to enhance the indexical quality of the image. The action takes place in the arid desert of Gansu, which is swept by an incessant wind, and the HD manages to vividly capture the material elements of such overwhelming natural scenery: the dust rising from the soil and the sand lying on the characters’ bulky garments are clearly discernible thanks to the sharpness of focus of the HD. The most relevant effect of this visual richness is the distinct sense of immediacy that connects the viewer to the image. Unlike the ‘old’ visual quality of celluloid films, the HD provides a strong sensorial experience based on an almost material feeling of closeness with the on-screen reality – images appear as ‘real’ as if one could almost touch them. This perception is strengthened by the use of a specific set of realist techniques. The most significant of these in the overall aesthetic structure of the film is, first, a powerful use of the depth of field both in outdoor and indoor scenes that, combined with a preference for long and extreme long shots, isolates the characters against the hostile vastness of the desert. Second, there is an insistent enactment of tailing *à la* Zavattini; the prisoners are restlessly followed as they move from the stark brightness of the outside camp to the oppressing darkness of their underground dormitory.¹⁴⁵ With regard to these tracking shots, Wang Bing interestingly reveals that another cameraman was on the film set with him but, soon after the shooting began, he thought it would be better to split the tasks: “he was in charge of the longest takes, those that needed to be well planned; I took care of the most complicated shots instead, the most urgent ones, those threatened by a lurking danger”.¹⁴⁶ This statement looks particularly relevant as it clearly proves Wang Bing’s ongoing connection with his documentary background, and more specifically with a *jishizhuyi* practice shaped by the creative possibility of *xianchang* unpredictability. But how can the shooting of a historical film be defined as “threatened by a lurking danger”? As mentioned earlier, it is not just a question of putting into practice a determined set of documentary-like techniques. More relevantly, it is a pervasive and all-embracing way of conceiving cinema that shapes *The Ditch* as a challenging aesthetic object. Firmly rooted in his documentary background, Wang Bing describes his approach to shooting as follows: “I do not

¹⁴⁴ Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 84.

¹⁴⁵ For a discussion of Zavattini’s poetics of tailing, see chapter 3.

¹⁴⁶ Cited in Mal, “Wang Bing.”

feel the need to change my way of shooting or my relation with the image. [Fiction and non-fiction,] is the same way of working, the same aesthetics".¹⁴⁷ More extensively:

My approach is largely inspired by documentary – hand-held camera, closeness to the people I am filming, and especially the ability to adapt to the circumstances, to be ready to change according to the obstacles I run up against. When you make a film under these conditions [in real locations in the Gansu desert], you cannot pretend to arrange too many things in advance. Whether documentary or fiction, the point is always to know what you want to put forward, what lives inside us and pushes us to make the film.¹⁴⁸

Within an overall poetic stance aiming to express a subjective idea about the world and thus not limited to objectively recording the reality 'out there', Wang Bing paradoxically approaches historical fiction in terms of living actuality, i.e. as marked by contingency, as an event unfolding in the contemporary here and now. In this sense, the *jishizhuyi* concern with the management of spontaneity develops here along a paradoxical and extreme allogenic line. Given this expressive attitude and the indexical quality of the HD image, the viewer's documentary response and historical perception are both strongly influenced. If this proves true throughout the whole duration of the film, its impact is particularly destabilising in the opening sequence. The film opens with a group of prisoners arriving at the camp, their figures clear-cut against the windy desert that is illuminated by an intense natural light. The sensorial perception of the scene is so vivid that it might persuade the viewer to place it historically at the present tense. Hence when an inter-title appears to specify the exact temporal collocation, "the viewers must adjust their perception of a contemporary picture to a representation of events occurred in [October] 1960".¹⁴⁹

Already recurrent in most of the considerations hitherto presented, the natural space – the inhospitable Gansu desert – is a key element in the film. As the backdrop against which the director tests his cinematic approach, exploits the possibilities of the HD medium, and puts into practice realist techniques, the space is the main cinematic feature sustaining the uneasy balance between fiction and nonfiction. Significantly, this tension runs in parallel with the temporal convergence that Wang Bing is aiming to achieve. As Elena Pollacchi aptly notices, "the undefined temporal connotation of the natural setting – the desert looks probably similar to that of 50 years ago – contributes to maintaining the tension between the events of the past

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Cited in "Entretien Wang Bing."

¹⁴⁹ Pollacchi, "Wang Bing's 'The Ditch'," 193.

(the historical narrative) and the recording of the actual space, which connects past and present".¹⁵⁰ In Wang's words:

How to shorten the distance between the audience and the topic of the film? [...] I chose to give no signals, not to use music for instance. The place and the subject allowed me to remain abstract, especially at the beginning of the film: it is impossible to [historically] situate the action (if not for certain clothes or the way the characters speak). No element enables us to know. It could be yesterday, tomorrow, or today. This is what I am interested in representing. People who lived there 50 years ago breathed the same air, walked on the same ground, saw the same sun as today. There are similitudes, correspondences...¹⁵¹

Similarly to the non-places described in the previous case studies (the factory in *24 City* and the apartment in the *Oxhide* series) but possibly with an additional critical twist, Wang Bing aims to design the film setting as substantially "abstract" in the sense of "atemporal". In this way, exposing a schizophrenic sense of *xianchang* – a feeling of being here and now, but also at some other point in history – the director detaches his gaze and opens up a space for critical reflection. As Pollacchi again points out, the temporal abstraction of the natural space suggests that such dreadful events are not confined historically to Jiabiangou, but may relate more universally to other historical tragedies.¹⁵² Or, as Sebastian Veg similarly argues, Wang "is expressly concerned with placing the episode of Jiabiangou within an ongoing history of violence".¹⁵³ These considerations further resonate with Paul Ward's argument that "the key is for a documentary representation of historical events not to capture the exact and detailed textures of 'what happened' but rather to communicate the underlying contextual forces at work, and thereby achieve some *explanatory* power rather than simply describing".¹⁵⁴ *The Ditch* thus works likewise, by abstracting the setting to finally expose the "contextual forces at work," namely the meaningful interplay of historical traumas and their critical contextualisation in the present.

However, Comolli's unquestionable postulate – 'you cannot film the past' – is not easily dismissible and a challenging aesthetic enterprise such as *The Ditch* carries the ongoing risk of imploding into a mere display of empty simulacra. This problem is already entailed in the practice of re-enactment which, as Nichols puts it, "presents the threat of disembodiment; the camera records those we see on screen with indexical fidelity, but these figures are also ghosts

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 194.

¹⁵¹ Cited in Mal, "Wang Bing."

¹⁵² Pollacchi, "Wang Bing's 'The Ditch'," 200.

¹⁵³ Veg, "The Limits of Representation," 182.

¹⁵⁴ Ward, *Documentary*, 63. Original emphasis.

or simulacra of others who have already acted out their parts".¹⁵⁵ To understand how Wang Bing escapes this conundrum, I find it useful to quote Linda Williams:

The lesson [...] is thus not at all that postmodern representation inevitably succumbs to a depthlessness of the simulacrum, or that it gives up on truth to wallow in the undecidabilities of representation. The lesson, rather, is that there can be historical depth to the notion of truth – not the depth of unearthing a coherent and unitary past, but the depth of the past's reverberation with the present. If the authoritative means to the truth of the past does not exist, [...] if [moving images] are more, as Baudrillard has suggested, like a hall of mirrors, then our best response to the crisis of representation might be [...] to deploy the many facets of these mirrors to reveal the seduction of lies.¹⁵⁶

Aware of the impossibility of disguising fiction totally, Wang Bing does not attempt to deny it, but rather exposes the film's fictional construction to strengthen its documentary attitude via self-reflexivity. Wang reveals "the seduction of lies" by consciously showing the constructedness of the mise-en-scene, enriching the film's interpretive stratification of yet another layer, that is, by shaping *The Ditch*, to a certain extent, as a self-reflexive documentary that focuses on the process of filmmaking itself and the struggle of shooting a film under hostile natural conditions. To understand this point, the actors' performances are the main filmic element to be taken into account. Commentators have discussed the quality of the film acting by highlighting how performances tend to be either over-emphatic or excessively detached. Given the film's visual appearance, the uneven acting gives it an estranging tone, which, as Veg suggests, by alternating the Stanislavskian pursuit of authenticity and Brechtian detachment, breaks with documentary illusion and underlines the fictional construction.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, Veg interprets the actors' "ponderous tones, [...] highly theatrical gestures and voice effects" as an explicit quotation of the propaganda films of 1950s, so that "the film becomes not so much a re-enactment of 'reality' as a self-reflexive re-actualization of the discursive and visual codes of the Mao era".¹⁵⁸ However, Veg also notices that the heroic identification with the characters, typical of propaganda films, is counteracted here by "a strategy of de-individualization" that constantly downplays the characters' subjective individuality and makes them almost undistinguishable from one another.¹⁵⁹ Interpreting this strategy within the theoretical boundaries of the present

¹⁵⁵ Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, 4.

¹⁵⁶ Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories," 73.

¹⁵⁷ Veg, "The Limits of Representation," 179-80.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

discussion, I contend that the acting in *The Ditch* negotiates between fictional and non-fictional performance, converting (fictional) melodramatic emphasis and estranging detachment into a simple (non-fictional) presentation or display of presence.¹⁶⁰ This remark can be further appreciated in light of Stella Bruzzi's differentiation between (fictional) performance in docudrama and (non-fictional) performance in performative documentary: in the first case, "the role of performance is, paradoxically, to draw the audience into the reality of situations being dramatized, to authenticate the fictionalization"; while in the second case it "draw[s] attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation" and constitutes "an alienating, distancing device".¹⁶¹ *The Ditch* straddles both these definitions, further contributing to highlight its ontologically hybrid status.

A more practical understanding of the acting issue can be achieved by looking at the productive contingencies of the film. In fact, budget constraints and the forbidding shooting conditions compelled the director to hire local non-professional and amateur actors. The artistic limitations of their performances can thus be reframed within a material discourse of production restrictions, but nonetheless one that the director consciously exploited for his own aesthetic benefit – and here is where the self-reflexive device works more convincingly. In placing his amateur actors within the scene and asking them to perform their lines from the script, what Wang Bing seems greatly interested in is studying the consequences of taking a camera to this cold and windy desert, and portraying the characters' interaction with such hostile natural surroundings. Hence, to a certain extent, what the camera aims to capture "is the struggle of performing and shooting in a bleak windswept location," combining fictional narrative elements with a non-fictional interest in documenting the filmmaking process in its unfolding.¹⁶² Since this self-reflexive element becomes "the real focus of the viewing experience," Wang Bing does not simply resolve the tension between fiction and non-fiction in dualistic terms, but rather powerfully "assumes the documentary as being an essential part of his narrative".¹⁶³

Since the inception of cinema, historical films have always filled the silver screen, and they probably always will do. Similarly, documentaries that, in a variety of different modes and formats, have addressed past historical events are certainly not a rarity. However, it is

¹⁶⁰ Contrastingly, in *Fengming* we witness the opposite process, namely from a nonfictional performance (the documentary testimony of the woman) to a fictional one. In fact, in his analysis of the film, Luke Robinson highlights the performative character of He's narration, namely the subject's conscious (and not spontaneous) development of a dramatic narrative. Robinson states that, "despite moments of emotion, the impression is of material that has been formalized through telling and telling over time." In fact, He had already published her memoir *Experience: My 1957* (Jingli – Wo de 1957 nian) in 2001, so, in this sense, "the testimony produced by the talking head is [...] already mediated". Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary*, 142-45.

¹⁶¹ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 185.

¹⁶² Pollacchi, "Wang Bing's 'The Ditch'," 192.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 191-93.

interesting to notice how in recent years a number of works have effectively challenged the representational conventions of historical films. Dissatisfied with both the modernist illusion of grand narratives and the postmodernist threat of the simulacrum, a number of filmmakers have critically and creatively rethought the ways in which cinema can address the often traumatic inheritance of the past. Documentary filmmaking, in particular, has been particularly open to experimentation. Just to mention a couple of relevant examples (which would deserve separate discussion), one can think of Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) – in which Indonesian death squad leaders are asked to re-enact the mass-killings they perpetrated in the late 1960s – or Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* (*L'image manquante*, 2013) – an autobiographic take on the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia completely re-enacted by means of clay statuettes. By connecting to, rethinking and overcoming previous models in a largely performative fashion, the central issue of all these works concerns the possibilities and methods to be employed in the representation of the past. *The Ditch* can be rightfully included in this group as a film that transversely connects different aesthetic traditions of Chinese cinema (from the re-enactment and staging typical of the dogmatic tradition to the *xianchang* attitude of *jishizhuyi*) while pointing to new expressive horizons. In this sense, *The Ditch* is perfectly consistent within the allogenic logic of a constantly evolving realist style and, more specifically, it perfectly represents a case in which film style and aesthetics alone, due to their inherent characteristics, are able to powerfully produce meaning and foster critical reflection. As Paul Ricoeur has argued, "fiction permits historiography to live up to the task of memory"; it speaks on behalf of "victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration"¹⁶⁴ and, one might add, for an adequate 'aesthetic narration', too.

¹⁶⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 189.

CONCLUSION

“I am a realist director. But we have to answer the question: what is realism today?”¹ Jia Zhangke’s deceptively simple yet intriguingly complex question opened the introductory chapter and guided my entire investigation. In light of the theoretical discussion, historical-cultural contextualisation, and case studies analysed in the previous chapters, below I shall weave all of the rhizomatic threads together and attempt to answer Jia’s question to finally make sense of the *jishizhuyi* alien put forward by this dissertation.

I. WHAT IS REALISM TODAY?

“What is realism today?” To approach this question, I suggest starting from André Bazin’s fundamental remark: “There is not one realism, but several realisms. Each period looks for its own, the technique and the aesthetics that will capture, retain, and render best what one wants from reality”.²

This statement entails many nuances. There is not one universally accepted notion of realism, as it takes different forms according to the geo-cultural location, historical epoch, and expressive medium. Even within a unified historical-cultural framework, several realist forms may coexist; therefore realism is hardly understandable as one single object, but is better envisioned as a plural proposition – a multiplicity of representational projects. China provides a clear illustration of this argument. On the one hand, Chinese cinema has historically developed several realist configurations showing non-homogenous characteristics (see chapter 2); and, on the other hand, it presents a plurality of realist practices that coexist simultaneously within a single contextual framework. Realist cinema in postsocialist China is in fact a broad terminological umbrella subsuming a number of cinematic expressions that, although variously interconnected, pursue their specific investigations in different ways. Besides the occurrence of a range of post-*jishizhuyi* articulations, the contemporary realist landscape includes a variety of practices: films that still adopt the observational aesthetics typical of standard *jishizhuyi*; non-mainstream yet officially approved works by former independent or underground filmmakers who have embarked on a less cutting-edge path; social documentaries focusing on the condition

¹ Cited in Frodon, “Bazin en Asie,” 77.

² Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 6.

of the lowest classes; and, stylised urban dramas set in middle-class contexts. Whilst it is true that “realism today” indicates more a set of practices than a unified concept, this plurality of voices nonetheless spins around a shared objective that gives consistency to the whole realist proposition: the will to give account of historical reality. In his abovementioned remark, Bazin interestingly states that any filmmaker, at any given time, by selecting and employing specific techniques and aesthetic solutions, will express “what one wants from reality”. This statement, too, entails multiple interpretations. What constitutes the historical reality that realist filmmakers aspire to give account of and, accordingly, what should be drawn from it? The answer to this question opens up a wide range of possibilities rather than a univocal solution: it can be a naturalistic rendering of social actualities, an emotional depiction unearthing some spiritual condition, a fictional narrative that truthfully matches real life, or a straightforward recording of contingent facts. Since clear-cut classifications are unlikely to be imposed within a rhizomatic system and, rather, multiple drives variously interconnect to generate contrasting internal tensions, I suggest that one extreme interpretation of Bazin’s remark could be that “there is not one realism, but several realisms” because several realisms can also productively coexist in one. I am persuaded that, by addressing the issue from this perspective, one can best appreciate the plural, hybrid and transformative nature of realism.

To effectively describe the complex stylistic configuration of *jishizhuyi* and update the critical understanding of the style, this thesis has suggested a more fluid reading of this practice, one that can take into account the plurality of visions and stimuli that have actually conditioned its aesthetics. Accordingly, my discussion has attempted to overcome constraining assumptions of spontaneity and objectivity, and argued instead for subjective directorial control to be exerted by filmmakers on the recorded reality. The claims of spontaneity and objectivity effectively show their relevance and consistency when investigated from a historical-ideological perspective, that is, as a response to the widespread need for truthfulness that followed the misrepresentations produced in the socialist period. However, by focusing on its actual aesthetic practice, *jishizhuyi* can be critically re-evaluated in light of a number of contextual and transnational factors that reveal its heterogeneous composition and its frequent deployment of subjective approaches to represent reality. In sum, *jishizhuyi* can be described as a field characterised by the interplay of multiple voices, yet this hybridity should not be understood as a static, crystallised matter of fact, but rather as an unfinished condition that is subject to constant redefinition. The transformative power of *jishizhuyi* and, more generally, of all film styles, is a central concept in my argumentation. The transvergent analysis carried out in the preceding chapters possibly provides an effective tool to account for the trajectories of agency that contribute to the renovation of a constant allogeneses. In this specific case, the transformative power of *jishizhuyi* has resulted in a number of post-*jishizhuyi*, often transgressive aesthetic tendencies that, on the

one hand, reveal their connection to the original style, while, on the other, radically departing from it. In other words, similar to the meaning of the prefix 'post-' in the word 'postsocialism', the post- in post-*jishizhuyi* is intended transversely as a connector of past and present aesthetic articulations suggesting a state of rich and unstable complexity, rather than a rational and clearly-defined succession of film styles.

To elaborate further on this, this transformative power is expressed through a process of progressive aestheticisation in which the contingent practice of *jishizhuyi* gradually turns into a more formally-aware and stylised cinematic expression. Some critics have understood this aesthetic refinement as a retreat into empty formalism, either in terms of 'cinematic excess' (an emphasis on formal features to compensate for the lack of narrative substance) or as a globalised commodity devoid of specific signification and thus shared by multiple transnational players – especially within the international film festival circuit (another rhizomatic system itself). Conversely, my analysis has addressed the idea of aestheticisation in more positive terms, attempting to understand how film aesthetics can be productively employed to generate meaning: unlike those who understand it as 'cinematic excess', I examined the ways in which formal features can complete the narrative by providing additional significance; unlike the idea of a globalised commodity, I have sought to understand how *jishizhuyi* has connected with a variety of other creative expressions and accordingly negotiated its practice in a process of unceasing evolution. By critiquing the earliest *jishizhuyi* works from an aesthetic perspective, one can contend that these films, prompted by an impelling need for material documentation of the real, were seduced by the phantom of technical mimesis and put their representational hopes in the recording capabilities of the medium. What they seem to have consciously forgotten are the creative opportunities offered by the camera, namely, the cinematic possibility of generating a world of images relying on aesthetics.

The kind of realist understanding conveyed by the post-*jishizhuyi* practice therefore differs from previous conceptions. Classic Euro-American realism, as a product of Western modernity, traditionally presented an omniscient narrator who weaved the different threads of the story to complete a rational and all-explaining narrative. On the contrary, the contingent positioning of *jishizhuyi* deliberately aims to provide partial and ambiguous accounts of everyday reality. Aiming to overcome *jishizhuyi*'s limited perspective and provide a more complete picture, yet without returning to the grand narratives of classic realism, post-*jishizhuyi* films work on the sensorial (through stylised aestheticisation) and the sensitive (by expressing a 'feeling of the real') to provide a more subtle and pervasive account of reality. Post-*jishizhuyi* films thus attempt to achieve a more comprehensive vision of reality by combining materialistic and spiritual investigation in the same cinematic gesture, and anchoring their practice to a naturalistic approach that is complemented by idiosyncratic aesthetic elements. Although the

latter – in the form of estranging atmospheres, supernatural occurrences, and fiction-nonfiction hybrids – are potentially disruptive with regard to previous understandings of film realism, I contend that they, too, rightfully participate in the discourse of film realism. Although breaking with conventional conceptions of film realism, the purpose of such devices is not to invalidate it, but rather to re-trace its borders. All types of realism in the history of Chinese cinema emerged in reaction to moments of cultural crisis or strong ideological reconfiguration. In the context of shocking economic, social, and cultural transformations, post-*jishizhuyi* works rethink ‘realism today’ as a flexible stylistic category that generates meaning beyond the superficial images of a reality, which feels largely elusive if not utterly incomprehensible. These subjective, often emotional realist representations thus take shape through the visual architectures of refined aesthetic configurations and prove as meaningful and real as the unstable material reality of contemporary China.

II. RESEARCH BOUNDARIES

The selection of case studies presented in this dissertation aims to be representative, though certainly not exhaustive, of the overall post-*jishizhuyi* landscape. I thus take the opportunity here to mention a number of other works and trends that, although analysable as part of my general discussion or as a consistent ramification thereof, were not finally included in the dissertation due to a number of reasons and constraints. Nonetheless, I contend that it is particularly useful to briefly discuss these additional examples here as they prove that the relevance of the aesthetic trends under discussion is not confined only to the specific case studies addressed in the previous chapters, but rather extends beyond them and (possibly) keeps evolving.

Combining the magical occurrences addressed in chapter 4 and the unconventional look at historical matters in films such as *24 City* and *The Ditch*, discussed in chapter 5, a first case in point is represented by historical films employing magic(al) elements. In this respect, Jiang Wen’s historical trilogy – *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Devils on the Doorstep* (*Guizi lai le*, 2000), and *The Sun also Rises* (*Taiyang zhaochang shengqi*, 2007) – looks particularly interesting as it investigates distinctive historical contexts by means of highly subjective, magic(al), or even outright fantastic elements. In the context of contemporary Chinese cinema, Jiang Wen’s trilogy stands as a ‘strange object’ that does not fit into any clearly identifiable category. It is not a derivation of Fifth Generation aesthetics, although Jiang’s popularity as an actor is linked to that cinematic tradition; and it is not exactly a mainstream product, although it effectively blends commercial and art-house aspirations at the same time. More significantly, Jiang Wen’s work

does not present a distinguishing stylistic connection with the *jishizhuyi* practice, nor does it embody one of its evolutions. For this reason, in order to keep my discussion more consistent, I did not discuss Jiang's films in the previous chapters. Nevertheless, some of the features analysed earlier, interestingly apply to his cinema as well.

Released in 1994 (hence preceding the temporal framework of my discussion), *In the Heat of the Sun* makes use of innovative cinematic language, not strictly to bear witness to actual historical facts (in this case, the Cultural Revolution), but to focus on the mechanisms through which we shape our narratives of the past, namely, memory and its devices. The film narrates in flashback the story of Ma Xiaojun, a teenager roaming the empty streets of Beijing with his friends in a hot summer during the Cultural Revolution. Ma takes a shine to the beautiful Milan, but, as the story unfolds, the film's narrator (the adult Ma Xiaojun) proves increasingly confused about her identity status: is she real or just an invention of his mind? By bringing together cinema and memory in an aesthetically innovative formula, the film places the act of lying at centre stage. Performed by an unreliable narrator as in *Suzhou River*, the cinematic lie (does Milan really exist?) contributes to shaping an emotional truth (teenage passions, nostalgia for a time past) that proves more relevant than historical truth itself. The occurrence of frequent dreamlike sequences that highlight the uncertainty of the narrator's memories further reinforces the film's magic attitude.

Set during the Japanese invasion of China, *Devils on the Doorstep* presents an unconventional (if not even controversial) portrayal of the Chinese resistance against the foreign occupation. The film starts with a mysterious man who remains hidden and identifies himself only as *Wo* ('Me'). He deposits two men in gunnysacks in the house of Ma Dasan, a local peasant, and forces him and his fellow villagers to look after them. When the two men turn out to be a Japanese sergeant and his Chinese translator, the locals have to confront their fear of the invaders. Due to its black-and-white visual outlook and the peculiar events that are narrated (first of all, the mysterious figure who prompts the story) the film distinctively possesses an estranging magic aura which, while still realistically sticking to accurate historical details, aesthetically contributes to conveying additional meaning pertaining to the sphere of the sensorial and the emotional. Towards the end of the film, an overtly magical occurrence (the decapitated head of the protagonist blinking and smiling) further reinforces the overall alienating feeling and allows the film to be read within a magic(al) framework.

Finally, in *The Sun also Rises*, the ferocity of the Cultural Revolution is recounted through a set of intertwined stories disguised as a fate-driven fable: a woman turns herself into a talking bird as she mourns for her lost love; two old friends have their friendship tested by rivalry over a beautiful woman; and, a man discovers his wife's adultery and plans to kill her young lover. Then, in the final episode, all of the characters are ideally reunited in a dreamlike sequence. For

its countryside narrative and the occurrence of supernatural features that are closer to the discourse of the fantastic than magic(al) realism (the difference between the two is discussed in chapter 4), the film closely connects with root-seeking poetics and shares a vision of the real that is akin to that of Carpentier and García Márquez. Whilst an emphasis on sensuous matters provides an unconventional depiction of life during the Cultural Revolution, the highly aestheticised visual configuration (excessive cinematography, unusual camera angles) conveys the sense of a historically-altered reality – visually flamboyant yet emotionally estranging, inherently magic(al) yet scarred by the underlying sorrow for a lost age. Also in this case, more than through strict historical-realist lenses, the film produces its (emotional) meanings by means of aesthetic choices expressing magic and narrative solutions pointing to the magical.

Beside Jiang Wen's works, another film that is worth mentioning in this context is Liu Bingjian's *The Back* (*Beimian*, 2010). The film investigates the traumatic legacy of the Cultural Revolution on the present through the story of a young man whose social life is profoundly affected by the memory of his father, who was a propaganda painter during the Maoist era. To address the indelible stain of that historical experience, the director opts for an impactful narrative and visual choice: a huge tattoo of Mao's face that the father tattooed on the body of the protagonist when he was still just a child. The tattoo is, first of all, an obvious symbol of the ineradicable persistence of the socialist past that still affects the social and emotional landscape of contemporary China. Moreover, in its visual exaggeration (it completely covers the back of the protagonist) and as it is connected to a sub-plot almost hinting at the horror genre (a criminal scheme to remove the tattooed skin and sell it in the art market), the tattoo acquires a fundamental magic connotation: it is concrete and tangible in its matter-of-factness, but at the same time puzzling and unequivocally connected to a underlying spiritual bewilderment. In this way, the film emotionally uncovers the inner mystery of a man, an age, and its repercussions on the present.

Other films that have been released more recently (and that do not necessarily deal with historical narration) may fit the theoretical model outlined in the previous chapter. Simultaneously proving an impressive poetic consistency and a brave will for stylistic renewal, Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) investigates the violent sides of corruption, social and ethical immorality in contemporary China. Inspired by real facts, the film presents four histories of violence: a miner's rebellion against a corrupted businessman that ends in bloodshed; a migrant worker who realises the empowerment deriving from the possession of a gun; a woman who furiously stabs a man who tries to rape her; and, a young man who commits suicide as he is unable to cope with a world that is controlled solely by the power of money. Although occasionally hinting at genre cinema in action scenes involving physical clashes, fire-arms and other deadly tools, Jia's exploration is still firmly rooted in the realist motivation to give account

of historical reality. As already noticed with reference to his previous works, reality is filtered through a process of supernaturalisation: on the one hand, this results in a series of aestheticised visual compositions combining stylised camera works and a pictorial taste in the use of colours; and, on the other hand, these aesthetic choices alienate reality from material contingency and point to a spiritual estrangement that effectively conveys the bewildered fury possessing the characters in their acts of extreme violence. To further stress this point, the film frequently juxtaposes the characters with images of animals (a beaten horse, an aggressive tiger, a menacing snake) that represent the inner souls of the protagonists: their (social) sorrow, their inner dangerousness, and their outbursts of violence. In this sense, overall, the film displays a pronounced magic attitude: in order to bear witness to a society scarred by multifarious forms of unethical injustice, the boundary between naturalism and (creative) formalism is continuously trespassed to generate a sense of restless shock and puzzlement in the audience.

As for the interplay of fiction and non-fiction, *Yumen*, an experimental documentary by Xu Ruotao, J.P. Sniadecki and Huang Xiang (2013), represents another fascinating case in point. Produced in association with the Sensory Ethnographic Lab of Harvard University, the film portrays the derelict spaces of Yumen, a town in Gansu province that was active in the 1980s as an oil-rich settlement and is now largely abandoned.³ This challenging work takes the performative argument developed in chapter 5 to its extreme as it combines a variety of stylistic elements and perspectives: observational ethnography of the town's ruins, avant-garde performance art, socialist nostalgia, idiosyncratic musical comments (Taiwan pop from the 1970s and contemporary Korean girl bands), and a plot-less succession of images of oil pumps and natural vistas. Filmed in 16mm (a disappearing format in itself), *Yumen* plays with representational conventions to push the documentary aesthetic to its limits, seeking new expressive strategies to document the reverberations of a quickly forgotten past on an often spectral present.

In this dissertation I decided to focus on two exemplary post-*jishizhuyi* trends whose transgressive potential could clearly make a case for my arguments. Thus it does not cover other post-*jishizhuyi* articulations, which are less disruptive in terms of aesthetics but nonetheless relevant in the context of contemporary Chinese cinema. One case in point is what I would call

³ Quoting the institutional page from the Harvard University website, "the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) is an experimental laboratory at Harvard University that promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography. It uses analog and digital media to explore the aesthetics and ontology of the natural and unnatural world. Harnessing perspectives drawn from the arts, the social and natural sciences, and the humanities, the SEL encourages attention to the many dimensions of the world, both animate and inanimate, that may only with difficulty, if at all, be rendered with propositional prose. Most works produced in the SEL take as their subject the bodily praxis and affective fabric of human and animal existence." (<http://sel.fas.harvard.edu/>, accessed 21 April 2014). The most notable, and cinematically impressive, work produced from the SEL to date is possibly *Leviathan* co-directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel (2012).

the above-ground non-mainstream cinema recently proposed by former independent/underground directors who are generally ascribed to the so-called Sixth Generation. Possibly signalling the formation of a new category in the Chinese film industry, the latest films by directors such as Zhang Yuan (*I Love You / Wo ai ni*, 2003; *Green Tea / Lü cha*, 2003; *Little Red Flowers / Kang shangqu hen mei*, 2006; *Beijing Flickers / You zhong*, 2012), Wang Xiaoshuai (*Shanghai Dreams / Qing Hong*, 2005; *Chongqing Blues / Rizhao Chongqing*, 2010; *11 Flowers / Wo 11*, 2011), and Lou Ye (*Mystery / Fucheng mishi*, 2012; *Blind Massage / Tui na*, 2014) embody a kind of above-ground cinema that nonetheless delivers non-mainstream products, which uneasily straddle big mainstream production and the niche art-house world. Although presenting a more conventional choice of topics and stylistic solutions, these works still advocate realism as a means to carry out their cinematic investigations.

Another post-*jishizhuyi* articulation not covered in the present dissertation is the case of stylised urban dramas focusing on the vicissitudes of the emerging middle-class. Epitomised by films such as Lou Ye's *Mystery* and Vivian Qu's *Trap Street (Shuiyin jie)*, 2013), this set of works keeps showing a pronounced emphasis on formal matters. However, what differs most distinctively from classic *jishizhuyi* production, traditionally committed to the representation of the lowest classes, is a fresh exploration of a middle-class social context, which is possibly still under-represented in contemporary Chinese (realist) cinema.

III. RESEARCH RAMIFICATIONS

In line with the fluidity, inter-connectedness, and constant transformation advocated by my theoretical model of transvergence, this discussion necessarily remains open-ended, and in this open-endedness resides the potential for further research developments. Hence, to conclude, I would like to suggest some future extensions that my investigation could eventually undertake.

By taking advantage of the possibilities uncovered by the rhizomatic structure and fostering transnational explorations through the tools of comparative analysis, the transvergent method could be adopted to discuss the networked development of auteur languages in contemporary East-Asian cinema. Unlike conventional film narratives that tend to place the auteurs' activity within a totally self-referential limbo, I would rather emphasise how contemporary East-Asian auteurs participate in a complex system of transnational networks in which they connect and negotiate the flow of material and immaterial capital – namely funds, expertise and knowledge. These networks include actual spaces devoted to professional interactions, such as film markets and film festivals; however these can also be abstract networks in which the production of ideas and the transmission of culture travel along the

wireless lines of the interconnected globalised world, and can be effectively addressed by means of the transvergent analysis. These interactions result in a shared set of poetics, styles and topics that East-Asian filmmakers employ in their works, while still filtering them through their own distinguishing cinematic vision. Instances include: further articulations of magical realist poetics, in addition to the works already analysed in the present dissertation, such as Kore-eda Hirokazu's *Air Doll* (Kûki ningyô, 2009), Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady* (Sud pralad, 2004) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Loong Bonmee raleuk chat, 2010); representation of dystopian futures – e.g. Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole* (Dong, 1998), Yu Lik-wai's *All Tomorrow's Parties* (Mingri tianya, 2003), and Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013); reality transfigured into a musical form – e.g. Tsai Ming-liang's *The Wayward Cloud* (Yi tianbian duo yun, 2005), Peter Chan's *Perhaps Love* (Ruguo ai, 2005), Garin Nugroho's *Requiem from Jawa* (Opera Jawa, 2006), and Miike Takashi's *For Love's Sake* (Ai to Makoto, 2012); reflection on the film medium and the limits of the cinematic exploration – e.g. Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Syndromes and a Century* (Sang sattawat, 2006), Kim Ki-duk's *Arirang* (2011); Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs* (Jiaoyou, 2013); the blurring of boundaries between art-house and commercial cinema and a redefinition of genre conventions – e.g. the work of directors Bong Joon-ho and Miike Takashi; the phenomenon of 'derivative auteurism' – e.g. Lee Kang-sheng's *Help Me Eros* (Bangbang wo aishen, 2007) with respect to Tsai Ming-liang's cinema and Zhao Ye's *Last Chestnuts* (Mitsuo no kuri, 2011) in relation to Kawase Naomi's *The Mourning Forest* (Mogari no mori, 2007). Such research would contribute to the existing scholarship in the field of East-Asian studies in several respects. In light of the processes of knowledge transmission activated by the transnational networks, this kind of comparative investigation would rethink the mechanisms of cultural negotiation and artistic influence in the context of East-Asian cinema by explaining how common concerns are shared through the networks. On the other hand, in light of these same interactions, a re-conceptualisation of the notion of auteur could be articulated with specific reference to the East-Asian cultural context. More generally, this research would comment on several aspects concerning auteur cinema in East Asia (production, circulation, developments of forms and contents) and could eventually provide a comprehensive picture of the current state of the art.

Realism is undeniably one of the most established cinematic languages in film practice worldwide. However, its widespread affirmation does not equate to ideas of expressive fixity and stylistic immobility. On the contrary – unstable and transformative, inherently rich and complex – realism is diversely appropriated according to differing historical-cultural environments in China as elsewhere. For this reason, it always proves open to renewals and developments, and stands out as a fascinating subject for academic investigation. Although

liable to further theoretical refinements and analytical improvements, the framework of transvergence, as applied to the study of realism in China, represents a remarkable opportunity for original research – the possibility of uncharted critical explorations into an alien archipelago that reflects the interconnected and productive chaos of our contemporary times.

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